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The Waters of Edera

THE

WATERS OF EDERA

BY

OUIDA, pseud of
Author of De la Ramée
The Messarenes," "Under Two Flags," Etc., Etc.

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The Waters of Edera

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I

It was a country of wide pastures, of moors covered with heath, of rock-born streams and rivulets, of forest and hill and dale, sparsely inhabited, with the sea to the eastward of it, unseen, and the mountains everywhere visible always, and endlessly changing in aspect.

Herdsmen and shepherds wandered over it, and along its almost disused roads pedlars and pack mules passed at times but rarely. Minerals and marbles were under its turf, but none sought for them; pools and lakes slept in it, undisturbed, save by millions of water fowl and their pursuers. The ruins of temples and palaces were overgrown by its wild berries and wild flowers. The buffalo browsed where emperors had feasted, and the bittern winged its slow flight over the fields of forgotten battles.

It was the season when the flocks are brought through this lonely land, coming from the plains to the hills. Many of them passed on their

way thus along the course of the Edera water. The shepherds, clothed in goatskin, with the hair worn outward, bearded, brown, hirsute men, looking like savage satyrs, the flocks they drove before them travel-worn, lame, heart-broken, the lambs and kids bleating painfully. They cannot keep up with the pace of the flock, and, when they fall behind, the shepherds slit their throats, roast their bodies over an evening fire, or bake them under its ashes, and eat them; if a town or village be near, the little corpses are sold in it. Often a sheep dog or a puppy drops down in the same way, footsore and worn out; then the shepherds do not tarry but leave the creatures to their fate, to die slowly of thirst and hunger.

The good shepherd is a false phrase. No one is more brutal than a shepherd. If he were not so he could not bear his life for a day.

All that he does is brutal. He stones the flock where it would tarry against his will. He mutilates the males, and drags the females away from their sucking babes. He shears their fleeces every spring, unheeding how the raw skin drops blood. He drives the halting, footsore, crippled animals on by force over flint and slate and parching dust. Sometimes he makes them travel twenty miles a day.

For his pastime he sets the finest of his beasts to fight. This is the feast day and holiday sport

of all the shepherds; and they bet on it until all they have, which is but little, goes on the heads of the rams; and one will wager his breeches, and another his skin jacket, and another his comely wife, and the ram which is beaten, if he have any life left in him, will be stabbed in the throat by his owner: for he is considered to have disgraced the *branca.*

This Sunday and Saints' day sport was going on on a piece of grass land in the district known as the Vale of Edera.

On the turf, cleared of its heaths and ferns, there was a ring of men, three of them shepherds, the rest peasants. In the midst of them were the rams, two chosen beasts pitted against each other like two pugilists. They advanced slowly at first, then more quickly, and yet more quickly, till they met with a crash, their two foreheads, hard as though carven in stone, coming in collision with a terrible force; then each, staggered by the encounter, drew back dizzy and bruised to recoil and take breath and gather fresh force, and so charge one on the other in successive rounds until the weaker should succumb, and, mangled and senseless, should arise no more.

One of the rams was old, and one was young; some of the shepherds said that the old one was more wary and more experienced, and would have the advantage; in strength and height they were

nearly equal, but the old one had been in such duels before and the young one never. The young one thought he had but to rush in, head downward, to conquer; the old one knew this was not enough to secure victory. The young one was blind with ardour and impatience for the fray; the old one was cool and shrewd and could parry and wait.

After three rounds the two combatants met in a final shock; the elder ram butted furiously, the younger staggered and failed to return the blow, his frontal bone was split, and he fell to the ground; the elder struck him once, twice, thrice, amidst the uproarious applause of his backers; a stream of blood poured from his skull, which was pounded to splinters; a terrible convulsion shook his body and his limbs; he stretched his tongue out as if he tried to lap water; the men who had their money on him cursed him with every curse they knew; they did not cut his throat, for they knew he was as good as dead.

"This is a vile thing you have done," said a little beggar girl who had been passing, and had been arrested by the horrible fascination of the combat, and forced against her will to stand and watch its issue. The shepherds jeered; those who had backed the victor were sponging his wounds beside a runlet of water which was close at hand;

those who had lost were flinging stones on the vanquished. The girl knelt down by the dying ram to save him from the shower of stones; she lifted his head gently upward, and tried to pour water through his jaws from a little wooden cup which she had on her, and which she had filled at the river. But he could not swallow; his beautiful opaline eyes were covered with film, he gasped painfully, a foam of blood on his lips and a stream of blood coursing down his face; a quiver passed over him again; then his head rested lifeless on her knees. She touched his shattered horns, his clotted wool, tenderly.

"Why did you set him to fight?" she said with an indignation which choked her voice. "It was vile. He was younger than the other and knew less."

Those who had won laughed. Those who had lost cursed him again; he had disgraced his *branca*. They would flay him, and put him in the cauldron over the wood fire, and would curse him even whilst they picked his bones for a white-livered spawn of cowards; a son of a thrice-damned ewe.

The girl knew that was what they do. She laid his battered head gently down upon the turf, and poured the water out of her cup, her eyes were blind with tears; she could not give him

back his young life, his zest in his pastoral pleasures, his joy in cropping the herbage, his rude loves, his merry gambols, his sound sleep, his odorous breath.

He had died to amuse and excite the ugly passions of men, as, as if he had lived longer he would, in the end, have died to satisfy their ugly appetites.

She looked at his corpse with compassion, the tears standing in her eyes; then she turned away. and as she went saw that her poor ragged clothes were splashed here and there with blood, and that her arms and hands were red with blood: she had not thought of that before; she had thought only of him. The shepherds did not notice her; they were quarrelling violently in dispute over what had been lost and won, thrusting their fingers in each other's faces, and defiling the fair calm of the day with filthy oaths.

The girl shrank away into the heather with the silent swiftness of a hare; now that she had lost the stimulus of indignant pity, she was afraid of these brutes; if the whim entered into them they would be as brutal to her as to their flock.

Out of fear of them she did not descend at once to the river, but pushed her way through the sweet-smelling, bee-haunted, cross-leaved heaths; she could hear the sound of the water on her right

all the time as she went. She knew little of this country, but she had seen the Edera, and had crossed it farther up its course on one of its rough tree-bridges.

When, as well as she could judge, she had got half a mile away from the scene of the rams' combat, she changed her course and went to the right, directed by the murmur of the river. It was slow walking through the heath and gorse which grew above her head, and were closely woven together, but in time she reached shelving ground, and heard the song of the river louder on her ear. The heath ceased to grow within a few yards of the stream and was replaced by various water plants and by acacia thickets; she slid down the banks between the stems and alighted on her bare feet where the sand was soft and the water-dock grew thick. She looked up and down the water, there was no one in sight, nothing but the banks rose-hued with the bloom of the heather, and, beyond the opposite shore, in the distance, the tender amethystine hues of the mountains. The water was generally low, leaving the stretches of sand and of shingle visible, but it was still deep in many parts.

She stripped herself and went down into it, and washed the blood which had by this time caked upon her flesh. It seemed a pity she thought to sully with that dusky stain this pure, bright, shin-

ing stream; but she had no other way to rid herself of it, and she had in all the world no other clothes than these poor woollen rags.

Her heart was still sore for the fate of the conquered ram; and her eyes filled again with tears as she washed his blood off her in the gay running current. But the water was soothing and fresh, the sun shone on its bright surface; the comfrey and fig-wart blew in the breeze, the heather smell filled the atmosphere.

She was only a child and her spirits rose, and she capered about in the shallows, and flung the water over her head, and danced to her own reflection in it, and forgot her sorrow. Then she washed her petticoats as well as she could, having nothing but water alone, and all the while she was as naked as a Naiad, and the sun smiled on her brown, thin, childish body as it smiled on a stem of plaintain or on the plumage of a coot.

Then when she had washed her skirt she spread it out on the sand to dry, and sat down beside it for the heat to bake her limbs after her long bath. There was no one, and there was nothing, in sight; if any came near she could hide under the great dock leaves until such should have passed. It was high noon, and the skirt of wool and the skirt of hemp grew hot and steamed under the vertical rays; she was soon as dry as the shingles from which the

water had receded for months. She sat with her hands clasped round her updrawn knees, and her head grew heavy with the want of slumber, but she would not sleep, though it was the hour of sleep. Some one might pass by and steal her clothes she thought, and how or when would she ever get others?

When the skirt was quite dried, the blood stains still showed on it; they were no longer red, but looked like the marks from the sand. She tied it on round her waist and her shirt over it, and wound an old crimson sash round both. Then she took up her little bundle in which were the wooden cup and a broken comb, and some pieces of hempen cloth and a small loaf of maize bread, and went on along the water, wading and hopping in it, as the water-wagtails did, jumping from stone to stone and sinking sometimes up to her knees in a hole.

She had no idea where she would rest at night, or where she would get anything to eat; but that reflection scarcely weighed on her; she slept well enough under stacks or in outhouses, and she was used to hunger. So long as no one meddled with her she was content. The weather was fine and the country was quiet. Only she was sorry for the dead ram. By this time they would have hung him up by his heels to a tree and have pulled his skin off his body.

She was sorry; but she jumped along merrily in the water, as a kingfisher does, and scarcely even wondered where its course would lead her.

At a bend in it she came to a spot where a young man was seated amongst the bulrushes, watching his fishing net.

"Aie!" she cried with a shrill cry of alarm like a bird who sees a fowler. She stopped short in her progress; the water at that moment was up to her knees. With both hands she held up her petticoat to save it from another wetting; her little bundle was balanced on her head, the light shone in her great brown eyes. The youth turned and saw her.

She was a very young girl, thirteen at most; her small flat breasts were still those of a child, her narrow shoulders and her narrow loins spoke of scanty food and privation of all kinds, and her arms and legs were brown from the play of the sun on their nakedness; they were little else than skin and bone, nerves and sinew, and looked like stakes of wood. All the veins and muscles stood revealed as in anatomy, and her face, which would have been a child's face, a nymph's face, with level brows, a pure, straight profile, and small close ears like shells, was so fleshless and so sunburnt that she looked almost like a mummy. Her black eyes had in them the surprise and sadness of those of a weaning calf's; and her hair,

too abundant for so small a head, would, had it not been so dusty and entangled, have been of a red golden brown, the hue of a chestnut which has just burst open its green husk.

"Who are you?" said the young man, looking at her in surprise.

"I am Nerina," answered the child.

"Where do you come from? What is your country?"

She pointed vaguely to the south-west mountains, where the snow on the upper ranges was lying with bands of cloud resting on it.

"From the Abruzzi?"

She was silent. She did not know the mountains of her birthplace by their name.

"Who was your father?" he asked, with some impatience.

"He was Black Fausto."

"What did he do for a living?"

"He went down with the fair season to the Roman plain."

He understood: the man had no doubt been a labourer, one of those who descend in bands from the villages of the Abruzzi heights to plough, and mow, and sow, and reap, on the lands of the Castelli Romani; men who work in droves, and are fed and stalled in droves, as cattle are, who work all through the longest and hottest days in summer, and in the worst storms of winter;

men who are black by the sun, are half naked, are lean and hairy and drip with continual sweat, but who take faithfully back the small wage they receive to where their women and children dwell in their mountain-villages.

"He went, you say? Is he ill. Does he work no longer?"

"He died last year."

"Of what?"

She gave a hopeless gesture. "Who knows? He came back with a wolf in his belly, he said, always gnawing and griping, and he drank water all day and all night, and his face burned, and his legs were cold, and all of a sudden his jaw fell, and he spoke no more to us. There are many of them who die like that after a hot season down in the plains."

He understood; hunger and heat, foul air in their sleeping places, infusoria in the ditch and rain water, and excessive toil in the extremes of heat and cold make gaps in the ranks of these hired bands every year as if a cannon had been fired into them.

"Who takes care of you now?" he asked with pity, as for a homeless bitch.

"Nobody. There is nobody. They are all gone down into the earth."

"But how do you live?"

"I work when I can. I beg when I cannot.

People let me sleep in the stalls, or the barns, and give me bread."

"That is a bad life for a girl."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I did not make it."

"And where are you going?"

She opened her arms wide and swept the air with them.

"Anywhere. Along the water, until I find something to do."

"I cannot do much," she added, after a pause. "I am little, and no one has taught me. But I can cut grass and card wool."

"The grass season is short, and the wool season is far off. Why did you not stay in your village?"

She was mute. She did not know why she had left it, she had come away down the mountain-side on a wandering instinct, with a vague idea of finding something better the farther she went: her father had always come back with silver pieces in his pocket after his stay down there in those lands which she had never seen, lying as they did down far below under the golden haze of what seemed an immeasurable distance.

"Are you not hungry?" said the fisher.

"I am always hungry," she said, with some astonishment at so simple a question. "I have been hungry ever since I can remember. We all were

up there. Sometimes even the grass was too dried up to eat. Father used to bring home with him a sack of maize; it was better so long as that lasted."

"Are you hungry now?"

"Of course."

"Come to my house with me. We will feed you. Come. Have no fear. I am Adone Alba, of the Terra Vergine, and my mother is a kind woman. She will not grudge you a meal."

The child laughed all over her thin, brown face.

"That will be good," she said, and leapt up out of the water.

"Poor soul! Poor little soul!" thought the young man, with a profound sense of pity.

As the child sprang up out of the river, shaking the water off her as a little terrier does, he saw that she must have been in great want of food for a long time; her bones were almost through her skin. He set his fishing pole more firmly in the ground, and left the net sunk some half a yard below the surface; then he said to the little girl: "Come, come and break your fast. It has lasted long, I fear."

Nerina only understood that she was to be fed; that was enough for her. She trotted like a stray cur, beckoned by a benevolent hand, behind him as he went, first through some heather and broom,

then over some grass, where huge olive trees grew, and then through corn and vine lands, to an old farmhouse, made of timber and stone; large, long, solid; built to resist robbers in days when robbers came in armed gangs. There was a wild garden in front of it, full of cabbage roses, lavender, myrtle, stocks, and wallflowers. Over the arched door a four-season rose-tree clambered.

The house, ancient and spacious, with its high-pitched roof of ruddy tiles, impressed Nerina with a sense of awe, almost of terror. She remained hesitating on the garden path, where white and red stocks were blossoming.

"Mother," said Adone, "Here is a hungry child. Give her, in your kindness, some broth and bread."

Clelia Alba came out into the entrance, and saw the little girl with some displeasure. She was kind and charitable, but she did not love beggars and vagabonds, and this half-naked female tatterdemalion offended her sense of decency and probity, and her pride of sex. She was herself a stately and handsome woman.

"The child is famished," said Adone, seeing his mother's displeasure.

"She shall eat then, but let her eat outside," said Clelia Alba, and went back into the kitchen.

Nerina waited by the threshold timid and mute

and humble, like a lost dog, her eyes alone expressed overwhelming emotions: fear and hope, and one ungovernable appetite, hunger.

Clelia Alba came out in a few minutes with a bowl of hot broth made of herbs, and a large piece of maize-flour bread.

"Take them," she said to her son.

Adone took them from her, and gave them to the child.

"Sit and eat here," he said, pointing to a stone-settle by the wall under the rose of four seasons.

The hands of Nerina trembled with excitement, her eyes looked on fire, her lips shook, her breath came feverishly and fast. The smell of the soup made her feel beside herself. She said nothing, but seized the food and began to drink the good herb-broth with thirsty eagerness though the steam of it scorched her.

Adone, with an instinct of compassion and delicacy, left her unwatched and went within.

"Where did you find that scarecrow?" asked his mother.

"Down by the river. She has nobody and nothing. She comes from the mountains."

"There are poor folks enough in Ruscino without adding to them from without," said Clelia Alba impatiently. "Mind she does not rob the fowl-house before she slips away."

"She has honest eyes," said Adone, "I am sure she will do us no harm."

When he thought that she had been given time enough to finish her food he went out; the child was stretched at full length on the stone seat, and was already sound asleep, lying on her back; the empty bowl was on the ground, of the bread there was no longer a crumb; she was sleeping peacefully, profoundly, her thin hands crossed on her naked brown bosom, on which some rose leaves had fallen from the rose on the wall above.

He looked at her in silence for a little while, then returned to his mother.

"She is tired. She sleeps. Let her rest."

"It is unsafe."

"How unsafe, mother? She is only a child."

"She may have men behind her."

"It is not likely."

Adone could not say (for he had no idea himself) why he felt sure that this miserable little waif would not abuse hospitality: "She is a child," he answered rather stupidly, for children are often treacherous and wicked, and he knew nothing of this one except what she had chosen to tell of herself.

"She may have men behind her," repeated his mother.

"Such men as you are thinking of mother, do

not come to this valley nowadays. Ulisse Ferrero was the last of them. Indeed, I think this poor little creature is all alone in the world. Go and look at her. You will see how forlorn and small she is."

She went to the doorway and looked at the sleeping beggar; her eyes softened as she gazed, the whole attitude and appearance of the child were so miserable and so innocent, so helpless, and yet so tranquil, that her maternal heart was touched; the waif slept on the stone bench beside the door of strangers as though she were in some safe and happy home.

Clelia Alba looked down on her a few moments, then took the kerchief off her hair, and laid it gently without awakening the sleeper over the breast and the face of the child, on which flies were settling and the sun was shining.

Then she picked up the empty earthenware bowl, and went indoors again.

"I will go back to the river," said Adone. "I have left the net there."

His mother nodded assent.

"You will not send this little foreigner away till I return?" he asked. Every one was a foreigner who had not been born in the vale of Edera.

"No; not till you return."

He went away through the sunshine and

shadow of the olive-trees. He knew that his mother never broke her word. But she thought as she washed the bowl: "A little stray mongrel bitch like that may bite badly some day. She must go. She is nothing now; but, by and by she may bite."

Clelia Alba knew human nature, though she had never been out of sight of the river Edera. She took her spinning-wheel and sat down by the door. There was nothing urgent to do, and she could from the threshold keep a watch on the little vagabond, and would be aware if she awoke. All around was quiet. She could see up and down the valley, beyond the thin, silvery foliage of the great olive-trees, and across it to where the ruins of a great fortress towered in their tragic helplessness. The sun shone upon her fields of young wheat, her slopes of pasture. The cherry-trees and the pear-trees were in bloom, her trellised vines running from tree to tree. Ragged-robin, yellow crowsfoot, purple orchis, filled the grass intermixed with the blue of borage and the white and gold of the oxeye. She did not note these things. Those fancies were for her son. Herself, she would have preferred that there should be no flower in the grasses, for before the cow was fed the flowers had to be picked out of the cut grass and had served no good end that she could perceive, for she knew of no bees except the wild ones

whose honey no one ever tasted, hidden from sight in hollow trees as it was.

Nerina slept on in peace and without dreams. Now and then another rose let fall some petals on her, or a bee buzzed above her, but her repose remained undisturbed. The good food filled her, even in her sleep, with deep contentment, and the brain, well nourished by the blood, was still.

Clelia Alba felt her heart soften despite herself for this lonely creature; though she was always suspicious of her, for she had never known any good thing come down from the high mountains, but only theft and arson and murder, and men banded together to solace their poverty with crime. In her youth the great brigands of the Upper Abruzzi had been names of terror in Ruscino, and in the hamlets lying along the course of the Edera, and many a time a letter written in blood had been fastened with a dagger to the door of church or cottage, intimating the will of the unseen chief to the subjugated population. Of late years less had been heard and seen of such men; but they or their like were still heard and felt sometimes, up above in lonely forests, or down where the moorland and macchia met, and the water of Edera ran deep and lonely. In her girlhood, a father, a son, and a grandson had been all killed on a lonely part of the higher valley because they had dared to occupy a farm and a

water-mill after one of these hillmen had laid down the law that no one was to live on the land or to set the water-wheel moving.

That had been a good way off, indeed, and for many a year the valley of Edera had not seen the masked men, with their belts, crammed with arms and gold, round their loins; but still, one never knew, she thought; unbidden guests were oftener devils than angels.

And it seemed to her that the child could not really be asleep all this time in a strange place and in the open air. At last she got up, went again to the bench and drew her handkerchief aside, and looked down on the sleeper; on the thin, narrow chest, the small, bony hands, the tiny virginal nipples like wood strawberries.

She saw that the slumber was real, the girl very young and more than half-starved. "Let her forget while she can," she thought, and covered her face again. "It is still early in the day."

The bees hummed on; a low wind swept over a full-blown rose and shook its loose leaves to the ground. The shadow from the ruined tower began to touch the field which lay nearest the river, a sign that it was two hours after noon.

II

THE large square fresh-water fishing-net had sunk under the surface, the canes which framed it were out of sight; only the great central pole, which sustained the whole, and was planted in the ground of the river-bank, remained visible as it bent and swayed but did not yield or break. Such nets as this had been washed by the clear green waters of the pools and torrents of the Edera ever since the days of Etruscan gods and Latin augurs; religions had changed, but the river, and the ways of the men of the river had not altered.

Adone did not touch it, for it was well where it was; he seated himself on the bank ready to seize and hold it if its pole showed any sign of yielding and giving way and heeling over into the stream. He sat thus amongst the bulrushes for many an hour, on many a spring day and summer night. Although fish were not numerous he never tired of his vigil, lulled by the sound of the current as it splashed among the stones and rippled through the rushes; a deeper music coming from its higher reaches where it fell over a ledge of rock and leapt like a live thing into the air. And, indeed, what thing could be more living than this fresh,

pure, untroubled water, glad as a child, swift as a swallow, singing for sport, as a happy boy sings, as it ran down on its way from the hills?

To the young man sitting now on its bank amidst the bulrushes it was as living as himself, his playmate, friend, and master, all in one. First of all things which he could remember were the brightness and the coolness of it as it had laved his limbs in his childhood on midsummer noons, his mother's hands holding him safely as he waded with rosy feet and uncertain steps along its pebbly bottom! How many mornings, when he had grown to boyhood and to manhood, had he escaped from the rays of the vertical sun into its acacia-shadowed pools; how many moonlit, balmy nights had he bathed in its still reaches, the liquid silver of its surface breaking up like molten metal as he dived! How many hours of peace had he passed, as he was spending this, waiting for the fish to float into his great net, whilst the air and the water were alike so still that he could hear the little voles stealing in and out amongst the reeds, and the water-thrush pushing the pebbles on its sands in search for insects, though beast and bird were both unseen by him! How many a time upon the dawn of a holy-day had he washed and swam in its waters whilst the bells of the old church in the village above had tolled in the softness of dusk!

He thought of none of these memories distinctly, for he was young and contented, and those who are satisfied with their lot live in their present; but they all drifted vaguely through his mind as he sat by the side of the river, as the memories of friends dear from infancy drift through our waking dreams.

He was in every way a son of the Edera, for he had been born almost in the water itself, for his mother had been washing linen with other women at the ford when she had been taken with the pains of labour two months before her time. Her companions had had no time or thought to do more than to stretch her on the wet sand, with some hempen sheets, which had not yet been thrown in the water, between her and the ground; and the cries of her in her travail had echoed over the stream and had startled the kingfishers in the osiers, and the wild ducks in the marshes, and the tawny owls asleep in the belfry tower of the village. But her pains had been brief though sharp, and her son had first seen the light beside the water; a strong and healthy child, none the worse for his too early advent, and the rough river-women had dipped him in the shallows, where their linen and their wooden beaters were, and had wrapped him up in a soiled woollen shirt, and had laid him down with his face on his mother's young breast, opening his shut unconscious mouth

with their rough fingers, and crying in his deaf ear, "Suck! and grow to be a man!"

Clelia Alba was now a woman of forty-one years old, and he, her only son, was twenty-four; they had named him Adone; the beautiful Greek Adonais having passed into the number of the saints of the Latin Church, by a transition so frequent in hagiology that its strangeness is not remembered save by a scholar here and there. When he had been born she had been a young creature of seventeen, with the wild grace of a forest doe, with that nobility of beauty, that purity of outline, and that harmony of structure, which still exist in those Italians in whom the pure Italiote blood is undefiled by Jew or Gentile. Now her abundant hair was white, and her features were bronzed and lined by open-air work, and her hands of beautiful shape were hard as horn through working in the fields. She looked an old woman, and was thought so by others, and thought herself so: for youth is soon over in these parts, and there is no half-way house between youth and age for the peasant.

Clelia Alba, moreover, had lost her youth earlier even than others: lost it forever when her husband at five-and-twenty years of age had been killed by falling from an olive-tree of which the branch sustaining him had cracked and broken under his weight. His neck had been broken in

the fall. She had been dancing and shouting with her two-year-old child on the grassland not far off, romping and playing ball with some dropped chestnuts; and when their play was over she had lifted her boy on to her shoulder and run with him to find his father. Under one of the great, gnarled, wide-spreading olives she had seen him, lying asleep as she thought.

"Oh, lazy one, awake! The sun is only two hours old!" she had cried merrily, and the child on her shoulder had cooed and shouted in imitation, "Wake—wake—wake!" and she, laughing, had cast a chestnut she had carried in her hand upon the motionless figure. Then, as the prostrate form did not stir, a sudden terror had seized her, and she had set the baby down upon the grass and run to the olive-tree. Then she had seen that this was death, for when she had raised him his head had dropped and seemed to hang like a poppy broken in a blast of wind, and his eyes had no sight, and his mouth had no breath.

From that dread hour Clelia Alba had never laughed again. Her hair grew white, and her youth went away from her forever.

She lived for the sake of her son, but she and joy had parted company for ever.

His death had made her sole ruler of the Terra Vergine; she had both the knowledge and the

strength necessary for culture of the land, and she taught her boy to value and respect the soil.

"As you treat the ground ill or well, so will your ground treat you," she said to him.

She always wore the costume of the province, which was similar to that of the Abruzzi villages, and suited her cast of features and her strong and haughty carriage. On feast-days she wore three strings of fine pearls round her throat, and bracelets of massive gold and of fine workmanship, so many in number that her arms were stiff with them; they had been her mother's and grandmother's and greatgrandmother's, and had been in her dower. To sell or pawn them under stress of need, had such occurred, would never have seemed to any of her race to be possible. It would have seemed as sacrilegious as to take the chalice off the church altar and melt its silver and jewels in the fire. When she should go to her grave these ornaments would pass to Adone for his wife, or for his future wife; none of her family were living.

"Never talk of death, mother," he said, whenever she spoke of these things. "Death is always listening; and, if he hear his name, he taps the talker on the shoulder just to show that he is there and must be reckoned with."

"Not so, my son!" replied Clelia, with a sigh.

"He has every soul of us written down in his books from the time we are born; we all have our hour to go and none of us can alter it."

"I do not believe that," said Adone. "We kill ourselves oftentimes; or we hasten our end as drunkards do."

"Did your father hasten his end?" said his mother. "Did not some one break that olive branch? It was not the tree itself, though the Ruscino folks would have it cut down because they called it a felon."

"Was it not the devil?" said Adone.

He believed in the devil, of course, as he had been taught to do, and had he not as a child met the infernal effigy everywhere—in marble, in stone, in wood, in colour, in the church and outside it; on water-spout and lamp-iron, and even on the leaves of his primer? But it seemed to him that the devil had "*troppo braccia*" given him, was allowed too long a tether, too free a hand; if indeed he it were that made everything go wrong, and Adone did not see who else it could be. Here, in the vale of Edera, all the world believed in Satan as in holy water, or in daily bread.

Clelia Alba crossed herself hastily, for she was a pious woman.

"We are talking blasphemy, my son," she said gravely. "Of course there is the good God who

orders the number of our days for each of us, and is over us all."

Adone was silent. To him it seemed doubtful. Did the good God kill the pretty little children as the butcher in a city killed his lambs? But he never contradicted or vexed his mother; he loved her with a great and tender affection. He was less ignorant than she was, and saw many things she could not see; he was, as it were, on a hilltop and she down in a valley, but he had a profound respect for her; he obeyed her implicitly, as if he were still a child, and he thought the world held no woman equal to her.

When he went back to his house that evening, with his great net on his shoulder and swinging in one hand some fresh-water fish, he looked at the stone bench, which was empty of all except some fallen rose-leaves, and then anxiously, questioningly, in the face of his mother.

She answered the regard.

"The girl is gone to Gianna's custody," she said rather harshly. "Gianna will give her her supper, and will let her sleep in the loft. With the morning we will see what we can do for her, and how she can be sped upon her way."

Adone kissed her hands.

"You are always good," he said simply.

"I am weak," answered his mother, "I am

weak, Adone; when you wish anything I consent to it against my judgment."

But she was not weak; or at least only weak in the way in which all generous natures are so.

On the morrow Nerina was not sped on her way. The old woman, Gianna, thought well of her.

"She is as clean as a stone in the water," she said; "she has foul-smelling rags, but her flesh is clean. She woke at dawn, and asked for something to do: She knows nought, but she is willing and teachable. We can make her of use. She has nowhere to go. She is a stray little puppy. Her people were miserable, but they seem to have been pious folks. She has a cross pricked on her shoulder. She says her mother did it when she was a babe to scare the devil off her. I do not know what to say; she is a poor, forlorn little wretch; if you like to keep her, I for my part will see to her. I am old: it is well to do a good work before one dies."

Gianna was an old woman, half house-servant, half farm-servant, wholly friend; she had lived at the Terra Vergine all her life; big, gaunt, and very strong, she could do the work of a man, although she was over seventy years of age; burnt black by the sun, and with a pile of grey hair like the hank of flax on her distaff, she was feared by the whole district for her penetrating glance and

her untiring energy. When Gianna was satisfied the stars had changed their courses, said the people, so rare was the event; therefore, that this little wanderer contented her was at once a miracle and a voucher indisputable.

So the child remained there; but her presence troubled Adone's mother, though Nerina was humble as a homeless dog, was noiseless and seldom seen, was obedient, agile, and became useful in many manners, and learned with equal eagerness the farm work taught her by Gianna, and the doctrine taught her by Don Silverio, for she was intelligent and willing in every way. Only Clelia Alba thought, " Perhaps Gianna's good heart misleads her. Gianna is rough; but she has a heart as tender at bottom as a ripe melon's flesh."

Anyhow, she took her old servant's word and allowed the child to remain. She could not bring herself to turn adrift a female thing to stray about homeless and hungry, and end in some bottomless pit. The child might be the devil's spawn. No one could be sure. But she had eyes which looked up straight and true, and were as clear as the river water where it flowed over pebbles in the shade. When the devil is in a soul he always grins behind the eyes; he cannot help it; and so you know him; thus, at least, they thought at Ruscino and in all the vale of Edera; and the devil did not lurk in the eyes of Nerina.

"Have I done right, reverend sir?" asked Clelia Alba of the Vicar of Ruscino.

"Oh, yes—yes—charity is always right," he answered, unwilling to discourage her in her benevolence; but in his own mind he thought, "the child is a child, but she will grow; she is brown, and starved, and ugly now, but she will grow; she is a female thing and she will grow, and I think she will be handsome later on; it would have been more prudent to have put some money in her wallet, and have let her pass on her way down the river. The saints forbid that I should put aloes into the honey of their hearts; but this child will grow."

Clelia perceived that he had his doubts as she had hers. But they said nothing of them to each other. The issue would lie with Time, whom men always depict as a mower, but who is also a sower too. However, for good or ill, she was there; and he knew that, having once harboured her, they would never drive her adrift. Clelia was in every sense a good woman; a little hard at times, narrow of sympathy, too much shut up in her maternal passion; but in the main merciful and correct in judgment.

"If the child were not good the river would not have given her to us," said Adone—and believed it.

"Good-day, my son," said the voice of the

Vicar, Don Silverio Frascara, behind him, where Adone worked in the fields. "Where did you find that scarecrow whom your mother has shown me just now?"

"She was in the river, most reverend, dancing along in it, as merry as a princess."

"But she is a skeleton!"

"Almost."

"And you know nothing of her?"

"Nothing, sir."

"You are more charitable than wise."

"One cannot let a little female thing starve whilst one has bread in the hutch. My mother is a virtuous woman. She will teach the child virtue."

"Let us hope so," said Don Silverio. "But all, my son, do not take kindly to that lesson."

"What will be, will be. The river brought her."

He credited the river with a more than human sagacity. He held it in awe and in reverence as a deity, as the Greeks of old held their streams. It would have drowned the child, he thought, if she had been an evil creature or of evil augury. But he did not say so, for he did not care to provoke Don Silverio's fine fleeting ironical smile.

A goatherd who passed some few days later with his flock on his way to the mountains, recognised the little girl.

"You are Black Fausto's daughter," he said to her. "Is he dead? Eh, well, we must all die. May his soul rest."

To Gianna, who questioned him, he said, "Yes, he was a good soul. Often have I seen him down in the Roman plains. He worked himself to death. These gangs of labourers get poor pay. I saw him also in the hills where this girl comes from, ever so high up, you seem to touch the sky. I summered there two years ago; he had his womankind in a cabin, and he took all that he got home to them. Aye, he was a good soul. We can come away out of the heats, but they have to stay down in them; for the reaping and the sowing are their chief gain, and they get the fever into their blood, and the worms into their bellies, and it kills them mostly before they are forty. You see, at Ansalda, where he came from it was snow eight months out of the twelve, so the heats and the mists killed him: for the air you are born in you want, and if you don't get it in time you sicken."

"Like enough," said Gianna, who herself had never been out of sight of the river Edera ever since she had been a babe in swaddling clothes. "Tell me, gossip, was the child born in wedlock?"

"Eh, eh!" said the goatherd grinning. "That I would not take on me to say. But like enough,

like enough; they are always ready to go before the priest in those high hills."

The little girl glided into her place humbly and naturally, with no servility but with untiring willingness and thankfulness. It seemed to her an amazing favour of heaven to live with these good people; to have a roof over her head and food regularly every day. Up there in her home, amongst the crags of Ansalda, she had never known what it was not to have a daily hunger gnawing always in her entrails, and making her writhe at night on her bed of dry leaves. In her thirteen years of life she had never once had enough—no one ever had. A full stomach had been a thing unknown.

She began to grow, she began to put a little flesh on her bones; they had cut her hair short, for it had not been clean, and it grew again burnished and bright like copper; colour came into her cheeks and her lips; she seemed to spring upward, visibly, like a young cane. She worked hard, but she worked willingly, and she was well nourished on sound food, though it had little variety and was entirely vegetable; and every day she went down and bathed in the river at the same place where she had sat nude under the dock leaves whilst her skirt dried in the sun.

To her the Terra Vergine was Paradise itself;

to be fed, to be clothed, to have a mattress to sleep on, to work amongst the flowers and the grass and the animals—it was all so beautiful, she thought sometimes that she must be in heaven.

She spoke little. Since she had been under this roof she had grown ashamed of the squalor and starvation and wretchedness of her past existence. She did not like to think of it even; it had been no fault of hers, but she felt ashamed that she ever should have been that little filthy, unkempt naked thing, grovelling on the clay floor, and fighting for mouldy crusts with the other children on the rock of Ansalda.

"If I had only known when father was alive," she thought, but even if she had known all she knew now, what could she have done? There had been nothing to use, nothing to eat, nothing to wear, and the rain and the snow and the wind had come in on them where they had lain huddled together on their bed of rotten leaves.

Now and then she said something of that rude childhood of hers to Adone; she was afraid of the women, but not of him; she trotted after him as the little white curly dog Signorino trotted after Don Silverio.

"Do not think of those dark days, little one," he said to her. "They are gone by. Think of your parents and pray for their souls; but let the rest go; you have all your life to live."

"My mother was young when she died," said the child. "If she had had food she would not have died. She said so. She kept on gnawing a bit of rag which was soaked in water; you cheat hunger that way, you know, but it does not fill you."

"Poor soul! Poor soul!" said Adone, and he thought of the great markets he had seen in the north, the droves of oxen, the piles of fruits, the long lines of wine carts, the heaps of slaughtered game, the countless shops with their electric light, the trains running one after another all the nights and every night to feed the rich; and he thought, as he had thought when a boy, that the devil had *troppo braccio,* if any devil indeed there were beside man himself.

Should there be anywhere on the face of the earth, young women, good women, mothers of babes who died of sheer hunger like this mother of Nerina's up yonder in the snows of the Abruzzi? He thought not; his heart revolted at the vision of her, a living skeleton on her heap of leaves.

"Father brought all he had," continued the child, "but he could not come back until after harvest, and when he came back she had been in the ground two months and more. They put him in the same ditch when his turn came; but she was no longer there, for they take up the bones every

three years and burn them. They say they must, else the ditch would get too full."

Adone shuddered. He knew that tens of thousands died so, and had died so ever since the days of Phenicians and Gauls and Goths. But it revolted him. The few gorged, the many famished —strange disproportion! unkind and unfair balance!

But what remedy was there?

Adone had read some socialistic and communistic literature; but it had not satisfied him; it had seemed to him vain, verbose, alluring, but unreal, no better adapted to cure any real hunger than the soaked rag of Nerina's mother.

III

THE Val d'Edera is situated on the south of the Marches, on the confines of what is now the territorial division of the Abruzzo-Molese, and so lies between the Apennines and the Adriatic, fanned by cool winds in summer from the eternal snow of the mountain peaks, and invigorated in all seasons by breezes from the Adrian Sea.

Ruscino, placed midway in the valley, is only a village to which no traveller had for many years come, and of which no geographer ever speaks; it is marked on the maps of military topographers, and is, of course, inscribed on the fiscal rolls, but is now no more than a village; though once when the world was young it was the Etruscan Rusciæ, and then the Latin Ruscinonis; and then when the Papacy was mighty, it was the militant principality of the fortified town of Ruscino. But it was now only an almost uninhabited village; a pale, diminutive, shrunken relic of its heroic self; and of it scarcely any man knows anything except the few men who make their dwelling there; sons of the soil, who spring from its marble dust and return to it.

It had shrunk to a mere hamlet as far as its population was counted; it shrank more and more with every census. There was but a handful of poor people who, when gathered together in the great church, looked no more than a few flies on a slab of marble.

The oldest men and women of the place could recall the time when it had been still of some importance as a posting place on the mountain route between the markets of the coast and the western towns, when its highway had been kept clean and clear through the woods for public and private conveyance, and when the clatter of horses' hoofs and merry notes of horns had roused the echoes of its stones. In that first half of the century, too, they had lived fairly well, and wine and fowls had cost next to nothing, and home-made loaves had been always large enough to give a beggar or a stray dog a slice. But these times had long been over; every one was hungry now and every one a beggar by way of change, and to make things equal, as the people said, with dreary mirth and helpless acquiescence in their lot. Like most riverain people they lived chiefly by the river, cutting and selling its canes, its sallows, its osiers, its sedges, catching its fish, digging its sand; but there were few buyers in this depopulated district.

Don Silverio Frascara, its vicar, had been sent to Ruscino as a chastisement for his too sceptical

and inquiring mind, his too undisciplined temper. Nearly twenty years in this solitude had chastened both; the fire had died out of his soul and the light out of his eyes. His days were as monotonous as those of the blinded ass set to turn the wine-press. All the steel of his spirit rusted, all the brilliancy of his brain clouded; his life was like a fine rapier which is left in a corner of a dusty attic and forgotten.

In certain rare states of the atmosphere the gold cross on St. Peter's is visible from some of the peaks of the Abruzzese Apennines. It looks like a speck of light far, far away in the silver-green of the western horizon. When one day he climbed to such an altitude and saw it thus, his heart contracted with a sickly pain, for in Rome he had dreamed many dreams; and in Rome, until his exile to the Vale of Edera, he had been a preacher of noted eloquence, of brilliant fascination, and of daring thought.

There had been long cypress alleys which at sunset had glowed with rose and gold where he had in his few leisure hours builded up such visions for the future as illumined the unknown years to the eyes of an Ignatius, a Hildebrand, a Lacordaire, a Bossuet. On the place where those grand avenues had stretched their green length in the western light and the seminarist had paced over the sward there were now long, dreary lines

of brick and stone, the beaten dust of roadways, the clang and smoke of engines; as the gardens had passed away so had passed his ambitions and visions, as the cypresses had been ground to powder in the steam mill so was he crushed and effaced under an inexorable fate. The Church, intolerant of individuality, like all despotisms, had broken his spirit; like all despotisms the tyranny had been blind. But he was rebellious to doctrine —she bound him to her stake.

He would have been a great prelate, perhaps even a great Pope; but he would have been also a great reformer, so she stamped him down into nothingness under her iron heel. And for almost a score of years she had kept him in Ruscino, where he buried and baptized the old and new creatures who squirmed in the dust, where any ordinary country priest able to gabble through the ritual could have done as well as he. Some few of the more liberal and learned dignitaries of the Church did indeed think that it was waste of great powers, but he had the Sacred College against him, and no one ventured to speak in his favour at the Vatican. He had no pious women of rank to plead for him, no millionaires and magnates to solicit his preferment. He was with time forgotten as utterly as a folio is forgotten on a library shelf until mildew eats its ink away and spiders nest between its leaves. He had the forty pounds

a year which the State pays to its parish priests; and he had nothing else.

He was a tall and naturally stately man, but his form was bent by that want of good food which is the chronic malady of many parts of Italy. There was little to eat in Ruscino, and had there been more there would have been no one who knew how to prepare it. Bread, beans, a little oil, a little lard, herbs which grew wild, goat's milk, cheese, and at times a few small river fish; these were all his sustenance; his feasts and his fasts were much alike, and the little wine he had he gave away to the sick and the aged. For this reason his high stature was bent and his complexion was of the clear, yellow pallor of old marbles; his profile was like the Cæsarian outline on a medallion, and his eyes were deep wells of impenetrable thought; his finely cut lips rarely smiled, they had always upon them an expression of bitterness as though the apple of life in its eating had been harsh and hard as a crab.

His presbytery was close to his church, a dreary place with a few necessaries and many books only within it, and his only servant was an old man, lame and stupid, who served also as sacristan.

It was a cure of souls which covered many miles but counted few persons. Outside the old walls of Ruscino nearly all the land of the vale of Edera was untilled, and within them a few poverty-

stricken people dragged out their days uncared for by any one, only remembered by the collectors of fiscal dues. "*They* never forget," said the people. "As soon as one is born, always and in every season, until one's bones rattle down into the ditch of the dead, *they* remember always."

The grasp of an invisible power took the crust off their bread, the toll off their oil, off their bed of sacking, off their plate of fish, and took their children when they grew to manhood and sent them into strange lands and over strange seas; they felt the grip of that hard hand as their forefathers had felt it under the Cæsars, under the Popes, under the feudal lords, under the foreign kings, so they felt it now under the Casa Sabauda; the same, always the same; for the manners and titles of the State may change, but its appetite never lessens, and its greed never spares. For twice a thousand years their blood had flowed and their earnings had been wrung out of them in the name of the State, and nothing was changed in that respect; the few lads they begot amongst them went to Africa, now as under Pompeius or Scipio; and their corn sack was taken away from them under Depretis or Crispi, as under the Borgia or the Malatesta: and their grape skins soaked in water were taxed as wine, their salt for their soup-pot was seized as contraband, unless it bore the government stamp, and if they dared say

a word of resistance there were the manacles and the prison under Vittorio and Umberto as under Bourbon or Bonaparte; for there are some things which are immutable as fate. At long intervals, during the passing of ages, the poor stir, like trodden worms, under this inexorable monotony of their treatment by their rulers; and then baleful fires redden the sky, and blood runs in the conduits, and the rich man trembles; but the cannon are brought up at full gallop and it is soon over; there is nothing ever really altered; the iron heel only presses the harder on the unhappy worm, and there is nothing changed.

Here at Ruscino there were tombs of nenfro which had overhung the river for thirty centuries; but those tombs have never seen any other thing than this, nor ever will until the light and the warmth of the sun shall be withdrawn for ever, and the earth shall remain alone with her buried multitudes.

There was only Don Silverio who thought of such a thing as this, a scholar all alone amongst barbarians; for his heart ached for his barbarians, though they bore him no love in return for his pity. They would have liked better a gossiping, rotund, familiar, ignorant, peasant priest, one of themselves, chirping formula comfortably over skeleton corpses.

In default of other interests he interested him-

self in this ancient place, passing from neglect into oblivion, as his own life was doing. There were Etruscan sepulchres and Pelasgic caves which had been centuries earlier rifled of their objects of value, but still otherwise remained untouched under the acacia woods by the river. There were columns, and terraces, and foundations of marble which had been there when the Latin city of Ruscinonis had flourished from the time of Augustus until its destruction by Theodoric. And nearest of all these to him were the Longobardo church and the ancient houses, and the dismantled fortress, and the ruined walls, of what had been the fief of the Toralba, the mediæval fortified town of Ruscino. It still kept this, its latest, name, but it kept little else. Thrice a thousand centuries had rolled over it, eating it away as the sea eats away a cliff. War and fire and time had had their will with it for so long that dropped acorns and pine-pips had been allowed leisure to sink between the stones, and sprout, and bud, and rise, and spread, and were now hoary and giant trees of which the roots were sunk deep into its ruins, its graves, its walls.

It had been Etruscan, it had been Latin, it had been Longobardo, it had been Borgian and Papal; through all these changes a fortified city, then a castellated town, then a walled village; and a village it now remained. It would never be more,

before many generations passed it would probably have become still less; a mere tumulus, a mere honeycomb of tombs, hidden beneath the wild sage and the clambering clematis, and would thus escape the shameful death of greater places from telegraph and telephone poles driven through their mosaic floors, and from wheels grinding to powder the dust of their deserted agoræ. It was perishing, surely though slowly, but in peace, with the grass growing on its temple stairs, and the woodbine winding round its broken columns.

The trained and stored intellect of Don Silverio could set each period of its story apart and read all the indices remaining of each. Ruscino was now to all others a mere poverty-stricken place, brown and gaunt and sorrowful, in the sun, with only the river beneath it to keep it clean and alive. But to him it was as a palimpsest of surpassing value and interest, which, sorely difficult to decipher, held its treasures close from the profane and the ignorant, but tempted and rewarded the scholar, like the lettering on a Pompeian nuptial ring, the cyphers on a funeral urn of Herculaneum. "After all my lot might be worse than it is," he thought with philosophy. "They might have sent me to a modern manufacturing town in Lombardy, or exiled me to a socialistic philanstère in the Ticino!"

Here, at least, he had history and nature, and

he enjoyed thousands of hours undisturbed in which to read or write, or muse and ponder on this chronicle of brick and stone, this buried mass of dead men's labours and of dead men's dust.

Doubtless his manuscripts would lie unknown, unread; no man would care for them; but the true scholar cares neither for public or posterity; he lives for the work he loves; and if he knows that he will have few readers in the future—maybe none—how many read Grotius, or Boethius, or Chrysostom, or Jerome?

Here, like a colony of ants, the generations had crowded one on another, now swept away by the stamp of a conqueror's heel and now succeeded by another toiling swarm, building anew each time out of ruin, undaunted by the certainty of destruction, taught nothing by the fate of their precursors.

From the profound sense of despair which the contemplation of the uselessness of human effort and the waste of human life produces on the scholar's mind, it was a relief to him to watch the gladness of its river, the buoyancy of its currents, the foam of white blossom on its acacia and syringa thickets, the gold spectres and green lances of its iris-pseudacorus, the sweep of the winds through its bulrushes and canebrakes, the glory of colour in the blue stars of its veronica, the bright rosy spikes of its epilobium. The river seemed

always happy, even when the great rainfall of autumn churned it into froth and the lightnings illumined its ink-black pools.

It was on the river that he had first made friends with Adone, then a child of six, playing and splashing in the stream, on a midsummer noon. Don Silverio also was bathing. Adone, a little nude figure, as white as alabaster in the hot light, for he was very fair of skin, sprang suddenly out of the water on to the turf above where his breeches and shirt had been left; he was in haste, for he had heard his mother calling to him from their fields; an adder started out of a coil of bind-weed and wound itself round his ankle as he stooped for his clothes.

The priest, standing waist-deep in the river a few yards away, saw it before the child did, and cried out to him: "Stand still till I come! Be not afraid!" Adone understood, and although trembling with terror and loathing as he realised his danger, and felt the slimy clasp of the snake, remained motionless as he was bidden to do. In a second of time the priest had leaped through the water to his side, seized the adder and killed it.

"Good boy," he said to the child. "If you had moved your foot the creature would have bitten you."

Adone's eyes filled with tears.

"Thank you, sir; thank you for mother," he

said very gently, for he was a shy child, though courageous.

The priest stroked his curls.

"There is death in the grass very often. We should not fear death, but neither should we run risk of it uselessly, especially when we have a mother whom it would grieve. Come and bathe at this spot, at this hour to-morrow and every day, if you like. I will be here and look after you; you are little to be alone."

They were often together from that day onwards.

The brutishness and greed of his flock oppressed him. He was sent here to have care of their souls, but where were their souls? They would all have sold them to the foul fiend for a mess of artichokes fried in oil.

In such a solitude as this he had been glad to be able to teach and move the young malleable mind of Adone Alba; the only one of them who seemed to have any mind at all. Adone also had a voice as sweet as a nightingale in the syringa bushes in May; and it pierced the gloom of the old naked gaunt church as a nightingale's thrills through the dark hour before dawn.

There was no other music in that choir except the children's or youth's voices; there was nothing to make music with except those flexible pipes of the boyish throats; and Don Silverio loved and

understood choral music; he had studied it in Rome. Adone never refused to sing for him, and when the voice of adolescence had replaced that of childhood, he would still stand no less docilely by the old marble lectern, and wake the melodies of early masters from the yellow pages.

The church was as damp as a vault of the dead; cold even when the dog-star reigned in the heavens. The brasses and bronzes were rusted with moisture, and the marbles were black with the spores of mould; rain dripped through the joints of the roof, and innumerable sparrows made their nests there; the mosaics of the floor were green from these droppings, and from those of the rain; the sun never entered through any of the windows, which were yellow with age and dust; but here, with a lantern for their only light, they solaced each other with the song of the great choral masters. Only Adone, although he never said or showed it, was glad when the huge key groaned in the lock of the outer door, and he ran out into the evening starlight, down the steep streets, across the bridge, and felt the fresh river air blowing on him, and heard the swirling of the water amongst the frost-stiffened canes; and saw far off in the darkened fields the glimmer of a light—the light of home.

That old home was the dearest thing on earth to the young man. He had never been away

from it but once, when the conscription called him. In that time, which had been to him like a nightmare, the time of his brief exile to the army, brief because he was the only son of a widow, he had been sent to a northern city, one of commerce and noise and crowded, breathless life; he had been cooped up in it like a panther in a den, like a hawk in a cage. What he saw of the vices and appetites of men, the pressure of greed and of gain, the harsh and stupid tyranny of the few, the slavish and ignoble submission of the many; the brutish bullying, the crouching obedience, the deadly routine, the lewd license of reaction—all filled him with disdain and with disgust. When he returned to his valley he bathed in the waters of Edera before he crossed his mother's threshold.

"Make me clean as I was when I left you!" he cried, and took the water in the hollow of his hands and kissed it.

But no water flows on the earth from land to sea which can wholly cleanse the soul as it cleanses the body.

That brief time under arms he cursed as thousands of youths have cursed it. Its hated stigma and pollution never wholly passed away. It left a bitterness on his lips, a soil upon his memories. But how sweet to him beyond expression, on his return, were the sound of the rushing river in the silence of the night, the pure odours of the

blossoming beanfields, the clear dark sky with its radiant stars, the sense of home, the peace of his own fields!

"Mother, whether life for me shall be long or short, here its every hour shall be spent!" he said, as he stood on his own ground and looked through the olive-trees to the river, running swiftly and strong beneath the moon.

"Those are good words, my son," said Clelia Alba, and her hands rested on his bowed head.

He adored both the soil and the water of this place of his birth; no toil upon either seemed to him hard or mean. All which seemed to him to matter much in the life of a man was to be free, and he was so. In that little kingdom of fertile soil and running stream no man could bid him come and go, no law ruled his uprising and his down lying; he had enough for his own wants and the wants of those about him, enough for the needs of the body, and the mind here had not many needs; at the Terra Vergine he was his own master, except so far as he cheerfully deferred to his mother, and all which he put into the earth he could take out of it for his own usage, though indeed the fiscal authorities claimed well nigh one-half, rating his land at far more than its worth. No doubt scientific agriculture might have made it yield more than it did; but he was content to follow the ways

of old; he farmed as men did when the Sun-god was the farm slave of Admetus. The hellebore and the violets grew at will in his furrows; the clematis and the ivy climbed his fig-trees; the fritillaria and the daphne grew in his pastures, and he never disturbed them, or scared the starling and the magpie which fluttered in the wake of his wooden plough. The land was good land, and gave him whatever he wanted; he grudged nothing off it to bird, or beast, or leaf, or flower, or to the hungry wayfarer who chanced to pass by his doors. In remote places the old liberal, frank, open-handed hospitality of an earlier time is still in Italy a practice as well as a tradition.

The house was their own, and the earth gave them their bread, their wine, their vegetables, their oil, hemp and flax for their linen, and herbs for their soup; of the olive-oil they had more than enough for use, and the surplus was sold once a year in the nearest town, San Beda, and served to meet the fiscal demands. They had rarely any ready money, but no peasant in Italy ever expects, unless by some luck at lotto, to have money in his pocket.

He worked hard; at some seasons extremely hard; he hired labour sometimes, but not often, for to pay for the hiring takes the profit off the land. But he had been used to such work from childhood, and it was never irksome to him; even

though he rose in the dark and rarely went home to supper till the stars were shining. He had no near neighbours except the poor folks in Ruscino. All surrounding him was grass and moor and wood, called communal property, but in reality belonging legally to no one; vast, still fragrant leagues of uninhabited country stretching away to the blue hills, home of the fox and the hare and the boar, of the hawk and the woodpecker and the bittern.

Through those wilds he loved to wander alone; the sweet stillness of a countryside which was uncontaminated by the residence of men stilling the vague unrest of his youth, and the mountains towering in the light lending to the scene the charm of the unknown.

In days of storm or rain he read with Don Silverio or sang in the church; on fine holy-days he roamed far afield in the lonely heatherlands and woodlands which were watered by the Edera. He carried a gun, for defence if need be, for there were boars and wolves in these solitudes; but he never used it upon bird or beast.

Like St. Francis of Assissi both he and Don Silverio took more pleasure in the life than in the death of fair winged things.

"We are witness, twice in every year, of that great and inexplicable miracle," the priest said often, "that passage of small, frail, unguided

creatures, over seas and continents, through tempests and simoons, and with every man's hand against them, and death waiting to take them upon every shore, by merciless and treacherous tricks, and we think nought of it; we care nought for it; we spread the nets and the gins—that is all. We are unworthy of all which makes the earth beautiful—vilely unworthy!"

One of the causes of his unpopularity in Ruscino was the inexorable persistence with which he broke their gins, lifted their nets, cleared off their birdlime, dispersed their watertraps, and forbade the favourite night poaching by lanterns in the woods. More than once they threatened his life, but he only smiled.

"*Faccia pure!*" he said, "you will cut a knot which I did not tie, and which I cannot myself undo."

But they held him in too much awe to dare to touch him, and they knew that again and again he went on bread and water himself to give his wine to the sick, or his strip of meat to their old people.

Moreover they feared Adone.

"If you touch a hair of Don Silverio's head, or the hem of his cassock, I will burn Ruscino," said Adone to one of those who had threatened his friend, "and you will all burn with it, for the

river will not help you; the river will turn to oil and make the flames rage tenfold."

The people were afraid as they heard him, for good as he was, and usually gentle, he could be on provocation both furious and pitiless if he were crossed.

"For sure 'tis the dead Tor'alba as speak in him," they said with fright under their breath, for there was a tale told in the district that Adone Alba was descended from the old war-lords.

The veterans of the village and the country-side remembered hearing their fathers say that the family of the Terra Vergine were descended from those great marquises who had reigned for centuries in that Rocca, which was now a grim ivy-covered ruin on the north of the Edera Water. But more than this no one could say; no one could tell how the warlike race had become mere tillers of the soil, or how those who had measured out life and death up and down the course of the valley had lost their power and possessions. There were vague traditions of a terrible siege, following on a great battle in the vale; that was all.

IV

THE church in which Don Silverio officiated every morning and evening for the benefit of a few old crones, had once been a Latin temple; it had been built from the Corinthian pillars, the marble peristyle, the rounded, open dome, like that of the Pantheon, of a pagan edifice; and to these had been added a Longobardo belfry and chancel; pigeons and doves roosted and nested in it, and within it was cold even in midsummer, and dark always as a vault. It was dedicated to St. Jerome, and was a world too wide for the shrunken band of believers who came to worship in it; there was a high, dark altar said to have been painted by Ribera, and nothing else that spoke in any way of art except the capitals of its pillars and the Roman mosaics of its floor.

The Longobardo bell-tower was of vast height and strength; within it were various chambers, and these chambers had served through many ages as muniment-rooms. There were innumerable documents of many different epochs, almost all in Latin, a few in Greek. Don Silverio, who was a

fine classic as well as a learned archæologist, spent all his lonely and cold winter evenings in the study of these early chronicles, his oil lamp burning pale and low, his little white dog lying on his knees.

These manuscripts gave him great trouble, and were in many parts almost unintelligible, in others almost effaced by damp, in others again gnawed by rats and mice. But he was interested in his labours and in his subject, and after several years of work on them, he was able to make out a consecutive history of the Vald'edera, and he was satisfied that the peasant of the Terra Vergine had been directly descended from the feudal-lords of Ruscino. That pittance of land by the water-side under the shadow of the ruined citadel was all which remained of the great fief to the youth in whose veins ran the blood of men who had given princes, and popes, and cardinals, and captains of condottieri, and patrons of art, and conquerors of revolted provinces, to the Italy of old from the beginning of the thirteenth century to the end of the sixteenth. For three hundred years the Tor'alba had been lords there, owning all their eyes could reach from mountain to sea; then after long siege the walled town and their adjacent stronghold had fallen into the hands of hereditary foes whose forces had been united against them. Fire and steel had done their worst, and only a month-old child had escaped from the burn-

ing Rocca, being saved in a boat laden with reeds at anchor in the river, and hidden by a faithful vassal. The child had grown to manhood and had lived to old age, leading a peasant's life on the banks of the Edera; the name had been mutilated in common usage amongst those who spoke only the dialect of the province, and for three more centuries father and son had succeeded each other, working for their daily bread where their ancestors had defied Borgia and Della Rovere, and Feltrio, and Malatesta; the gaunt dark shade of the dismantled citadel lying athwart their field between them and the setting sun.

Should he tell Adone this or not?

Would the knowledge of his ancestry put a thorn in the boy's contented heart? Would it act as a spur to higher things, or be merely as the useless sting of a nettle?

Who could say?

Don Silverio remembered the gorgeous dreams of his own youth; and what had been their issue?

At fifty years old he was buried in a deserted village, never hearing from year's end to year's end, one word of friendship or phrase of culture.

Would it be well or would it be wrong to disturb that tranquil acquiescence in a humble destiny? He could not decide. He dared not take upon himself so much responsibility. "In doubt

do nothing" has been the axiom of many wise men. The remembrance of the maxim closed his lips. He had himself been in early manhood passionately ambitious; he was only a priest, but of priests are made the Gregorio, the Bonifazio, the Leone, of the Papal throne; to the dreams of a seminarist nothing is impossible. But Adone had no such dreams; he was as satisfied with his lot as any young steer which wants nothing more than the fair fresh fields of its birth.

But one day as he was sitting with the boy, then fifteen years old, on the south bank of the Edera, the spirit moved him and he spake. It was the day of San Benedetto, when the swallows come. The grass was full of pink lychnis and yellow buttercups. A strong east wind was blowing from the sea. A number of martins, true to the proverb, were circling gaily above the stream. The water, reflecting the brilliant hues of the heavens, was hurrying on its seaward way, swollen by recent rains and hastened by a strong wind blowing from the eastern mountains.

The lands of the Terra Vergine lay entirely on the south-east bank of the river, and covered many acres, of which some was moorland still. Almost opposite to it was the one-arched stone bridge, attributed to Theodoric, and on the northern bank was the ruined Rocca towering above the trees

which had grown up around it; whilst hidden by it and by the remains of the fortifications was that which was now the mere village of Ruscino.

"Listen, Adone!" he said in his deep, melodious voice, grave and sweet as a mass of Palestrina. "Listen, and I will tell you the tale of yonder donjon and village, and of the valley of the Edera so far as I have been able to make it out for myself."

According to the writers whose manuscripts he had discovered the town of Ruscino, like Cremona, had existed before the siege of Troy, that is, six hundred years before the foundation of Rome. Of this there was no proof except tradition, but the ruins of the walls and the tombs by the riverside and in the fields proved that it had been an Etruscan city, and of some considerable extent and dignity, in those remote ages.

"The foundations of the Rocca," he continued, "were probably part of a great stronghold raised by the Gauls, who undoubtedly conquered the whole of this valley at the time when they settled themselves in what is now the Marches, and founded Senegallia. It was visited by Asdrubal, and burned by Alaric; then occupied by the Greek free lances of Justinian; in the time of the Frankish victories, in common with greater places, it was forced to swear allegiance to the first papal Adrian. After that it had been counted as one of

the fiefs comprised in the possessions of the Pentapolis; and later on, when the Saracens ravaged the shores of the Adriatic, they had come up the Vald'edera and pillaged and burned again. Gregory the Ninth gave the valley to the family of its first feudal lords, the Tor'alba in recompense for military service, and they, out of the remains of the Gallic, Etruscan, and Roman towns rebuilt Ruscino and raised the Rocca on the ruins of the castle of the Gauls. There, though at feud many a time with their foes, the Della Rovere, the Malatesta, and the Dukes of Urbino, they held their own successfully, favoured usually by Rome, and for three centuries grew in force and in possessions. But they lost the favour of Rome by their haughtiness and independence; and under pretext that they merited punishment, Cesare Borgia brought troops of mercenaries against them, and after a fierce conflict in the valley (the terrible battle of which the villagers preserved the memory) the town was besieged, and sacked.

"After this battle, which must have taken place on yonder moor, to the north-west, for the assailants had crossed the Apennines, the Tor'alba and the remnant of men remaining to them retreated within the walls of Ruscino.

"The whole place and the citadel were burning, set on fire by order of Borgia. The church alone was spared, and the dead men were

as thick as stones on the walls, and in the streets, and in the nave of the church, and on the steps of the houses. This river was choked with corpses, and dark with blood. The black smoke towered to the sky in billows like a sea. The mercenaries swarmed over the bastions and violated the women, and cut off their breasts and threw their bodies down into the stream and their children after them. The Lady of Tor'alba, valiant as Caterina Sforza, was the first slain. The whole place was given up to flame and carnage, and the great captains were as helpless as dead oxen. They were all slain amongst their troopers and their vassals, and their bodies were burnt when the fortress was fired.

"Only one little child escaped the massacre, a month-old babe, son of the Marquis of Tor'alba, who was hidden by a faithful servant amongst the reeds of the Edera in a basket. This servant was the only male who escaped slaughter.

"The river rushes were more merciful than man, they kept the little new-born lordling safe until his faithful vassal, under cover of the night, when the assailants were drunk and stupid with license gratified, could take him to a poor woman to be suckled in a cottage farther down the river. How he grew up I know not, but certain it is that thirty years later one Federigo Tor'alba was living where you live, and the glebe of the Terra

Vergine was his own, and your house and land have never changed hands or title since; only your own name has been truncated, as often happens in the speech of the people. How this land called the Terra Vergine was first obtained I cannot say; the vassal may have saved some gold or jewels which belonged to his masters, and have purchased these acres, or the land may have been taken up and put gradually into cultivation without any legal right to it; of this there is no explanation, no record. But from that time the mighty lordship of Tor'alba has been extinct, and scarcely exists now even in local tradition; although their effigies are on their tombs, and the story of their reign can be deciphered by any one who can read a sixteenth-century manuscript, as you might do yourself, my son, had you been diligent."

Adone was silent. He had listened with attention, as he did to everything which was said or read to him by Don Silverio. But he was not astonished, because he had often heard, though vaguely, the legend of his descent.

"Of what use is it?" he said, as he sat, moving the bright water with his bare slim feet. "Nothing will bring it all back."

"It should serve some great end," said Don Silverio, not knowing very well what he meant or to what he desired to move the young man's mind.

"Nobility of blood should make the hands cleaner, the heart lighter, the aims finer."

Adone had shrugged his shoulders.

"We are all equal!" he answered.

"We are not all equal," the priest said curtly. "There is no equality in nature. Are there even two pebbles alike in the bed of the river?"

Don Silverio, for the first time in his life, could have willingly let escape him some unholy word. It incensed him that he could not arouse in the boy any of that interest and excitement which had moved his own feelings so strongly as he had spent his spare evenings poring over the crabbed characters, and the dust-weighted vellum of the charred and mutilated archives discovered by him in a secret closet in the bell-tower of his church. With infinite toil, patience, and ability he had deciphered the Latin of rolls, registers, letters, chronicles, so damaged by water, fire, and the teeth of rats and mice, that it required all an archæologist's ingenuity and devotion to make out any sense from them. Summer days and winter nights had found him poring over the enigma of these documents, and now, when he had conquered and revealed their secret, he, who was most concerned in it, was no more stirred by curiosity or pride than if he had been one of the big tawny owls who had watched him at his labours in the dusk of the belfry.

Don Silverio was a learned man and a holy man, and should have despised such vanities, but an historic past had great seduction for him; a militant race fascinated him against his conscience, and aristocracy allured him despite all his better judgment: it seemed to him that if he had learned that he had come from a knightly *gens* such as this of the Tor'alba, he would have been more strongly moved to self-glorification than would have become a servant of the Church. He himself had no knowledge even of his own near parentage; he had been a forsaken child, left one dark autumn night in the iron cradle at the gates of a foundling hospital in Reggio Calabrese. His names had been bestowed on him by the chaplain of the institution; and his education had been given him by an old nobleman of the town, attracted by his appearance and intelligence as a child. He was now fifty years of age; and he had never known anything of kith and kin, or of the mingled sweetness and importunity of any human tie.

Adone sat silent, looking up at the fortress of his forefathers. He was more moved than his words showed.

"If we were lords of the land and the town and the people, we were also lords of the river," was what he was thinking; and that thought moved him to strong pride and pleasure, for he

loved the river with a great love, only equalled by that which he felt for his mother.

"They were lords of the river?" he asked aloud.

"Undoubtedly," answered the priest. "It was one of the highways of the province from east to west and *vice versâ* in that time; the signoria of this Rocca took toll, kept the fords and bridges and ferries; none could pass up and down under Ruscino without being seen by the sentinels on the ramparts here. The Edera was different then; more navigable, perhaps less beautiful. Rivers change like nations. There have been landslips which have altered its course and made its torrents. In some parts it is shallower, in others deeper. The woods which enclosed its course then have been largely felled, though not wholly. Sand has been dug from it incessantly, and rocks have fallen across it. As you know, no boats or barges which draw any depth of water can ascend or descend it now without being towed by horses; and in some parts, as here, it is too uncertain in its depth, too devious in its course, too precipitous in its fall for even small boats to adventure themselves upon it: its shoals of lilies can blossom unmolested where its surface is level. Yes; undoubtedly, the lords of Ruscino were also lords of the Edera, from its mouth to its source; and their river formed at once their

strongest defence and their weakest point. It was difficult sufficiently to guard so many miles of water; above all because, as I say, its course was so much clearer, and its depth so much greater, that a flotilla of rafts or cutters could ascend it from its mouth as far as this town in the Middle Ages; in fact, more than once, corsairs from the Levant and from Morocco did so ascend it, and though they were driven back by the culverins of the citadel, they every time carried off to slavery some of the youths and maidens of the plain."

Adone gazed across the river to the moss-grown walls which had once been fortifications still visible on the side of the hill, and to the frowning donjon, the blackened towers, the ruined bastions, of what had been once the Rocca, with the amber light and rosy clouds of the unseen sun behind them.

"Teach me Latin, your reverence," was all he said.

"I have always offered to do so," said Don Silverio.

Adone was again silent, swinging his slender brown feet in the water, and looking always upward at the evening sky beyond the great round shape of the dismantled fortress.

Adone learned some Latin with much difficulty, studying hard in his evening leisure in the winters, and with time he could decipher for himself,

with assistance from Don Silverio, the annals of the Tor'alba; and he saw that it was as certain as anything grown over with the lichens and cobwebs of time can be that he himself was the last of the race.

"Your father used to say something of the sort," his mother said; "but he had only heard it piecemeal from old people, and never heard enough to put the pieces together as you have done. 'What does it matter either?' he used to say; and he said those great lords had been cutthroats on the land and robbers on the river. For your father's father had worn the red shirt in his youth, as I have told you often, and thought but little of lords and princes."

But Adone was different; the past allured him with the fascination which it has for poets and scholars; he was neither of these, except in a vague, unconscious way; but his imagination was strong and fertile once aroused; the past, as suggested to him by the vicar, by degrees became to him a living thing and nearer than the present, as it is to scholars who are also poets. He was neither scholar nor poet; but he loved to muse upon that far-off time when his forefathers had been lords of the land and of the water.

He did not want the grandeur, he did not envy the power which they had possessed; but he

wished that, like them, he could own the Edera from its rise in the hills to its fall into the sea.

"Oh, dear river!" he said to it tenderly. "I love you. I love you as the dragon-flies do, as the wagtails do, as the water voles do; I am you and you are me. When I lean over you and smile, you smile back to me. You are beautiful in the night and the morning, when you mirror the moon and play with the sunbeams, when you are angry under the wind, and when you are at peace in the heat of the noon. You have been purple with the blood of my people, and now you are green and fresh as the leaves of the young vine. You have been black with powder and battle, now you are fair with the hue of the sky and the blue of the myosotis. You are the same river as you were a thousand years ago, and yet you only come down to-day from the high hills, young and strong, and ever renewing. What is the life of man beside yours?"

That was the ode which he sang in the dialect of the province, and the stream washed his feet as he sang; and with his breath on his long reed flute—the same flute as youths have made and used here ever since the days of Apollo Citharœdes—he copied the singing of the river, which piped as it ran, like birds at dawn.

But this was only at such times as daybreak or early night when he was alone.

There were but a few people within the ruined walls of Ruscino; most of the houses were tenantless and tottering to their fall. A few old bent men and weather-beaten women and naked children climbed its steep lanes and slept under its red-brown roofs, bawled to each other from its deep arched doorways to tell of death or birth, and gathered dandelion leaves upon its ramparts to cure their shrunken and swollen bladders. He knew them every one, he was familiar with and kind to them; but he was aloof from them by temperament and thought, and he showed them his soul no more than the night birds in the towers showed their tawny breasts and eyes of topaz to the hungry and ragged fowls which scratched amongst the dust and refuse on the stones in the glare of day.

"*Il bel Adone!*" sighed matrons and the maidens of the scattered farms and the old gloomy castellated granges which here and there, leagues distant from one another, broke the green and silent monotony of the vast historic country whose great woods sloped from hill to plain. But to these, too, he was indifferent, though they had the stern and solid beauty of the Latium women on their broad low brows, their stately busts, their ox-like eyes, their shapely feet and limbs; and often, joined to that, the red-gold hair and the fair skin of the Adriatic type. As they bound

the sheaves, and bore the water-jars, and went in groups through the seeding grass to chapel, or fountain, or shrine, they had the free, frank grace of an earlier time; just such as these had carried the votive doves to the altars of Venus and chaunted by the waters of the Edera the worship of Isis and her son. But to Adone they had no charm. What did he desire or dream of? Himself he could not have said. Perhaps they were too warm; it was certain that they left him cold.

Sometimes he leaned over the river and looked longingly into its depths.

"Show me the woman I shall love," he said to the water, but it hastened on, glad, tumultuous, unheeding; and he only saw the reflection of the white jonquils or the golden sword rush on its banks.

V.

FRUITS ripen quickly in these provinces, and children become women in a summer hour; but with Nerina, through want and suffering and hunger, physical growth had been slow, and she remained long a child in many things and many ways. Only in her skill and strength for work was she older than her actual age.

She could hoe, and reap, and sow: she could row and steer the boat amongst the shallows as well as any man; she could milk the cow, and put the steers in the waggon; she could cord, hemp, and weave, and spin either; she could carry heavy weights balanced on her head; she was strong and healthy and never ill, and with it all she was happy. Her large bright eyes were full of contentment, and her rosy mouth often smiled out of the mere gladness of living. Her senses were still asleep and her young soul wanted nothing more than life gave her.

"You can earn your bread anywhere now, little one," said Clelia Alba to her one day, when she had been there three years.

The girl shrank as under a blow; her brown

and rosy face grew colourless. "Do you wish me to go away?" she said humbly.

"No, no," said Clelia, although that was what she did desire. "No, not while I live. But should I die, you could not stay here with my son."

"Why?" said Nerina. She did not understand why.

Clelia hesitated.

"You ought to feel that yourself," she said harshly. "Young men and young maids do not dwell together, unless——"

"Unless what?" asked Nerina.

"You are a simpleton indeed, or you are shamming," thought Adone's mother; but aloud she only said: "It is not in our usage."

"But you will not die," said Nerina anxiously. "Why should you think of dying, madonna? You are certainly old, but you are not so very, very old."

Clelia smiled.

"You do not flatter, child. So much the better. Run away and drive in those fowls. They are making havoc in the beanfield."

She could not feel otherwise than tenderly towards this young creature, always so obedient, so tractable, so contented, so grateful; but she would willingly have placed her elsewhere could she have done so with a clear conscience.

"My son will never do ill by any creature under his roof," she thought. "But still youth is youth; and the girl grows."

"We must dower her and mate her; eh, your reverence?" she said to Don Silverio when he passed by later in that day.

"Willingly," he answered. "But to whom? To the owls or the cats at Ruscino?"

In himself he thought, "She is as straight and as slight as a chestnut wand, but she is as strong. When you shall try to bend her where she shall not want to go you will not succeed."

For he knew the character of Nerina in the confessional better than Clelia Alba judged of it in her house.

"It was not wise to bring her here," he added aloud. "But having committed that error it would be unfair to charge the child with the painful payment of it. You are a just woman, my good friend; you must see that."

Clelia saw it clearly, for she never tried to trick her conscience.

"Your reverence mistakes me," she answered. "I would not give her to any but a good man and a good home."

"They are not common," said Don Silverio. "Nor are they as easy to find as flies in summer."

What was the marriage of the poor for the

woman? What did it bring? What did it mean? The travail of child-bearing, the toil of the fields, the hardship of constant want, the incessant clamour on her ear of unsatisfied hunger, the painful rearing of sons whom the State takes away from her as soon as they are of use, painful ending of life on grudged crusts as a burden to others on a hearth no longer her own. This stripped of glamour is the lot nine times out of ten of the female peasant—a creature of burden like the cow she yokes, an animal valued only in her youth and her prime; in old age or in sickness like the stricken and barren goat, who has nought but its skin and its bones.

Poor little Nerina!

As he went home he saw her cutting fodder for a calf; she was kneeling in a haze of rose colour made by the many blossoms of the *orchis maculata* which grew there. The morning light sparkled in the wet grass. She got up as she saw him cross the field, dropped her curtsey low with a smile, then resumed her work, the dew, the sun, the sweet fresh scents shed on her like a benison.

"Poor little soul," thought Don Silverio. "Poor little soul! Has Adone no eyes?"

Adone had eyes, but they saw other things than a little maiden in the meadow-grass.

To her he was a deity; she believed in him and worshipped him with the strongest faith as a little

sister might have done. She would have fought for him like a little mastiff; she would have suffered in his service with rapture and pride; she was as vigilant for his interests as if she were fidelity incarnated. She watched over all that belonged to him, and the people of Ruscino feared her more than they feared Pierino the watch-dog. Woe-betided the hapless wight who made free with the ripe olives, or the ripe grapes, with the fig or the peach or the cherry which grew on Adone's lands; it seemed to such marauders that she had a thousand eyes and lightning in her feet.

One day, when she had dealt such vigorous blows with a blackthorn stick on the back of a lad who had tried to enter the fowl-house, that he fell down and shrieked for pardon, Adone reproved her. "Remember they are very poor, Nerina," he said to her. "So were your own folks, you say."

"I know they are poor," replied Nerina. She held to her opinions. "But when they ask, you always give. Therefore it is vile to rob you. Besides," she added, "if you go on and let them steal they do not thank you; and they will steal and steal and steal till you will have nothing left."

Whatever she saw, whatever she heard, she told Adone; and he gave ear to her because she was not a chatterer, but was usually of few words. All her intelligence was spent in the defence and

in the culture of the Terra Vergine; she did not know her alphabet, and did not wish to do so; but she had the quickest of ears, the keenest of eyes, the brightest of brains.

One morning she came running to him where he was cutting barley.

"Adone! Adone!" she cried breathlessly, "there were strange men by the river to-day."

"Indeed," said Adone astonished, although strangers were never seen there. Ruscino was near no highroad, and the river had long ceased to be navigable.

"They asked me questions, but I put my hands to my ears and shook my head; they thought I was deaf."

"What sort of men were they?" he asked with more attention, for there were still those who lived by violence up in the forests which overhung the valley of the Edera.

"How do I know? They were clothed in long woollen bed-gowns, and they had boots on their feet, and on their heads hats shaped like kitchen-pans."

Adone smiled. He saw men from a town, or country fellows who aped such men, with a contempt which was born at once of that artistic sense of fitness which was in him, and of his adherence to the customs and habits of his province. The city-bred and city-clothed man looked to him

a grotesque and helpless creature, much sillier than an ape.

"That sounds like citizens or townsfolk. What did they say?"

"I could not understand; but they spoke of the water, I think, for they pointed to it and said a great deal which I did not understand, and seemed to measure the banks, and took your punt and threw a chain into the water in places."

"Took castings? Used my punt? That is odd! I have never seen a stranger in my life by the Edera. Were they anglers?"

"No."

"Or sportsmen?"

"They had no guns."

"How many were they?"

"Three. They went away up the river talking."

"Did they cross the bridge?"

"No. They were not shepherds, or labourers, or priests," said Nerina. In these classes of men her own acquaintance was confined.

"Painters, perhaps!" said Adone; but no artists were ever seen there; the existence even of the valley was scarcely known, except to topographers.

"What are painters?" said Nerina.

"Men who sit and stare and then make splashes of colour."

"No; they did not do that."

"It is strange."

He felt vaguely uneasy that any had come near the water; as a lover dislikes the pressure of a crowd about his beloved in a street, so he disliked the thought of foreign eyes resting on the Edera. That they should have used his little punt, always left amongst the sedges, seemed to him a most offensive and unpardonable action.

He went to the spot where the intruders had been seen, but there was no trace of them, except that the wet sand bore footprints of persons who had, as she had said of them, worn boots. He followed these footprints for some mile or more up the edge of the stream, but there he lost them from sight; they had passed on to the grass of a level place, and the dry turf, cropped by sheep to its roots, told no tales. Near this place was a road used by cattle drivers and mules; it crossed the heather for some thousand yards, then plunged into the woods, and so up over the hills to the town of Teramo, thirty-five kilometres away. It was a narrow, rough, steep road, wholly unfit for vehicles of any kind more tender than the rude ox-treggia, slow as a snail, with rounds of a tree-trunk for its wheels and seldom used except by country folks.

He would have asked Don Silverio if he had heard or seen anything of any strangers, but the

priest was away that day at one of the lonely moorland cabins comprised in his parish of Ruscino, where an old man, who had been a great sinner in his past, was at his last gasp, and his sons and grandsons and great-grandchildren all left him to meet his end as he might.

It was a fine day, and they had their grain to get in, and even the women were busy. They set a stoup of water by him, and put some in his nostrils, and shut the door to keep out the flies. It was no use to stay there they thought. If you helped a poor soul to give up the ghost by a hand on his mouth, or an elbow in his stomach, you got into trouble; it was safer to leave him alone, when he was a-dying.

Don Silverio had given the viaticum to the old man the night before, not thinking he would outlive the night. He now found the door locked and saw the place was deserted. He broke the door open with a few kicks, and found the house empty save for the dying creature on the sacks of leaves.

"They would not wait! They would not wait —hell take them!" said the old man, with a groan, his bony hands fighting the air.

"Hush, hush! the holy oil is on you," said Don Silverio. "They knew I should be here."

It was a charitable falsehood, but the brain of the old man was still too awake to be deceived by it.

"Why locked they the door, then? Hell take them! They are reaping in the lower fields—hell take them!" he repeated, his bony, toothless jaws gnashing with each word.

He was eighty-four years old; he had been long the terror of his district and of his descendants, and they paid him out now that he was powerless; they left him alone in that sun-baked cabin, and they had carefully put his crutch out of reach so that if any force should return to his paralysed body he should be unable to move.

It was the youngest of them all, a little boy of seven years old, who had thought to do that; the crutch had hit him so often.

The day had been only beginning when Don Silverio had reached the cabin, but he resolved to await there the return of the family; its hours were many and long and cruel in the midsummer heat, in this fœtid place where more than a score of men, women, and children of all ages slept and swarmed through every season, and where the floors of beaten earth were paven with filth three millimetres thick. The people were absent, but their ordure, their urine, their lice, their saliva were left there after them, and the stench of all was concentrated on this bed where the old man wrestled with death.

Don Silverio stayed on in the sultry and pestilent steam which rose up from the floor. Gnats and flies of all kinds buzzed in the heavy air, or

settled in black knots on the walls and the rafters. With a bunch of dried maize leaves he drove them off the old man's face and hands and limbs, and ever and again at intervals gave the poor creature a draught of water with a few drops in it from a phial of cordial which he had brought with him. The hours passed, each seeming longer than a day; at last the convulsive twitching of the jaws ceased; the jaw had fallen, the dark cavern of the toothless mouth yawned in a set grimace, the vitreous eyes were turned up into the head; the old man was dead. But Don Silverio did not leave him; two sows and a hog were in a stye which was open to the house; he knew that they would come and gnaw the corpse if it were left to them; they were almost starving, and grunted angrily.

He spent so many vigils similar to this that the self-sacrifice entailed in them never struck either him or those he served.

When the great heat had passed he set the door wide open; the sun was setting; a flood of light inundated the plain from the near mountains on the west, where the Leonessa towered, to those shadowy green clouds which far away in the east were the marshes before the sea. Through the ruddy glory of the evening the family returned, dark figures against the gold; brown women, half-nude men, footsore children, their steps dragging reluctantly homeward.

At the sight of the priest on the threshold they stopped and made obeisance humbly in reverent salutation.

"Is he dead, most reverend?" said the eldest of the brood, a man of sixty, touching the ground with his forehead.

"Your father is dead," said Don Silverio.

The people were still; relieved to hear that all was over, yet vaguely terrified, rather by his gaze than by his words. A woman wept aloud out of fear.

"We could not let the good grain spoil," said the eldest man, with some shame in his voice.

"Pray that your sons may deal otherwise with you when your turn shall come," said Don Silverio; and then he went through them, unmoved by their prayers and cries, and passed across the rough grass-land out of sight.

The oldest man, he who was now head of the house, remained prostrate on the threshold and beat the dust with his hands and heels; he was afraid to enter, afraid of that motionless, lifeless bag of bones of which the last cry had been a curse cast at him.

Don Silverio went on his way over the moors homeward, for he had no means except his own limbs whereby to go to his scattered parishioners. When he reached the village and climbed its steep stones night had long fallen and he was

sorely tired. He entered by a door which was never locked, and found an oil wick burning on his table, which was set out with the brown crockery used for his frugal supper of cheese and lettuces and bread. His old servant was abed. His little dog alone was on the watch, to welcome him. It was a poor plain place with whitewashed walls and a few necessary articles of use; but it was clean and sweet, its brick floors were sanded, and the night air blew in from its open casement with the freshness from the river in it. Its quiet was seldom disturbed except by the tolling of the bell for church services; it was welcome to him after the toil and heat and stench of the past day.

"My lot might have been worse," he thought, as he broke his loaf; he was disinclined to eat; the filthy odours of the cabin pursued him.

He was used to have had a little weekly journal sent to him by the post which came at rare intervals on an ass's back to Ruscino, the ass and his rider with a meal sack half filled by the meagre correspondence of the district, making the rounds of that part of the province with an irregularity which seemed as natural to the sufferers by it as to the postman himself. He cannot be everywhere at once they said of him with indulgence.

When Don Silverio reached home that evening the little news-sheet was lying on his table beside the rude brown crockery set out for his supper,

with cheese, lettuces, and bread. He scarcely touched the food, he was saddened and sickened by the day he had passed, although there had been nothing new in it, nothing of which he had not been witness a hundred times in the cabins of his parishioners. The little paper caught his eye, he took it and opened it. It was but a meagre thing, tardy of news, costing only two centimes, but it was the only publication which brought him any news of the outer world from which he was as much separated as though he had been on a deserted isle in mid-ocean.

By the pale light of a single wick, he turned over its thin sheet to distract his thoughts; there was war news in east and west, Church news in his own diocese and elsewhere; news of fires and wrecks, of suicides, of thefts, news all ten days old and more; political news also, scanty and timidly related. The name of the stream running underneath the walls of Ruscino caught his regard; a few lines were headed with it, and these lines said curtly:

"The project to divert the course of the Edera river will be brought before the Chamber shortly: the Minister of Agriculture is considered to favour the project."

He held the sheet nearer to the light and read the paragraph again, and yet again. The words were clear and indisputable in their

meaning, they could not be misconstrued. There was but one river Edera in the whole province, in the whole country; there could be no doubt as to what river was meant; yet it seemed to him utterly impossible that any such project could be conceived by any creature. Divert the course of the Edera? He felt stupefied. He read the words over and over again; then he read them aloud in the stillness of the night, and his voice sounded strong in his own ears.

"It must be a misprint; it must be a mistake for the Era of Volterra or the Esino, north of Ancona," he said to himself, and he went to his book closet and brought out an old folio geography which he had once bought for a few pence on a Roman bookstall, spread it open before him, and read one by one the names of all the streams of the peninsula, from the Dora Baltea to the Giarretta. There was no other Edera river. Unless it were indeed a misprint altogether the stream which flowed under his church walls was the one which was named in the news-sheet.

"But it is impossible, it is impossible!" he said so loudly that his little dog awoke and climbed on his knee uneasily and in alarm. "What could the people do? What could the village do or the land or the fisher folk? Are we to have drought added to hunger? Can they respect nothing? The river belongs to the valley; to seize it, to appraise

it, to appropriate it, to make away with it, would be as monstrous as to steal his mother's milk from a yearling babe!"

He shut the folio and pushed it away from him across the table. "If this be true," he said to himself. "If, anyhow, this monstrous thing be true, it will kill Adone."

In the morning he awoke from a short perturbed sleep with that heavy sense of a vaguely remembered calamity which stirs in the awakening brain like a worm in the unclosing flower.

The morning office over he sought out the little news-sheet, to make sure that he had read aright; his servant had folded it up and laid it aside on a shelf, he unfolded it with a hand which trembled; the same lines stared at him in the warm light of sunrise as in the faint glimmer of the floating wick. The very curtness and coldness of the announcement testified to its exactitude. He did not any longer doubt its truth; but there were no details, no explanations; he pondered on the possibilities of obtaining them; it was useless to seek them in the village or the countryside, the people were as ignorant as sheep.

Adone alone had intelligence, but he shrank from taking these tidings to the youth, as he would have shrunk from doing him a physical hurt. The news might be false or premature; many projects were discussed, many schemes

sketched out, many speculations set on foot which came to nothing in the end; were this thing true Adone would learn it all too soon and read it on the wounded face of nature. Not at least until he could himself be certain of its truth would he speak of it to the young man whose fathers had been lords of the river.

His duties over for the forenoon, he went up the three hundred stairs of his bell-tower, to the wooden platform, between the machicolations. It was a dizzy height, and both stairs and roof were in ruins, but he went cautiously, and was familiar with the danger. The owls which bred there were so used to him that they did not stir in their siesta as he passed them. He stood aloft in the glare of noonday and looked down on the winding stream as it passed under the ruined walls of Ruscino, and growing, as it flowed, clearer and clearer, and wilder and wilder, as it rushed over stones and boulders, foaming and shouting, rushed through the heather on its way towards the Marches. Under Ruscino it had its brown mountain colour still, but as it ran it grew green as emeralds, blue as sapphires, silver and white and grey like a dove's wings; it was unsullied and translucent; the white clouds were reflected on it. It went through a country lonely, almost deserted, only at great distances from one another was there a group of homesteads, a cluster

of stacks, a conical cabin in some places where the woods gave place to pasture; here and there were the ruins of a temple, of a fortress, of some great marble or granite tomb; but there was no living creature in sight except a troop of buffaloes splashing in a pool.

Don Silverio looked down on its course until his dazzled eyes lost it from sight in the glory of light through which it sped, and his heart sank, and he would fain have been a woman to have wept aloud. For he saw that its beauty and its solitude were such as would likely enough tempt the spoilers. He saw that it lay fair and defenceless as a maiden on her bed.

He dwelt out of the world now, but he had once dwelt in it; and the world does not greatly change, it only grows more rapacious. He knew that in this age there is only one law to gain, only one duty, to prosper; that nature is of no account, nor beauty either, nor repose, nor ancient rights, nor any of the simple claims of normal justice. He knew that if in the course of the river there would be gold for capitalists, for engineers, for contractors, for promoters, for speculators, for attorneys, for deputies, for ministers, that then the waters of the Edera were in all probability doomed.

He descended the rotten stairs slowly, with a weight as of lead at his heart. He did not any

longer doubt the truth of what he had read. Who or what shall withstand the curse of its time?

"They have forgotten us so long," he thought, with bitterness in his soul. "We have been left to bury our dead as we would, and to see the children starve as they might; they remember us now because we possess something which they can snatch from us."

He did not doubt any more. He could only wait: wait and see in what form and in what time the evil would come to them. Meantime, he said to himself, he would not speak of it to Adone, and he burned the news-sheet. Administrations alter frequently and unexpectedly, and the money-changers, who are fostered by them, sometimes fall with them, and their projects remain in the embryo of a mere prospectus. There was that chance.

He knew that in the age he lived in, all things were only estimated by their value to commerce or to speculation; that there was neither space nor patience amongst men for what was, in their reckoning, useless; that the conqueror was now but a trader in disguise; that civilisation was but the shibboleth of traffic; that because trade follows the flag, therefore to carry the flag afar, thousands of young soldiers of every nationality are slaughtered annually in poisonous climes and obscure warfare, because such is the *suprema lex*

and will of the trader. If the waters of Edera would serve to grind any grist for the mills of modern trade they would be taken into bondage with many other gifts of nature as fair and as free as they were. All creation groaned and travailed in pain that the great cancer of the cities should spread.

"It is not only ours," he remembered with a pang; on its way to and from the Vald'edera the river passed partially through two other communes, and water belongs to the district in which it runs. True, the country of each of these was like that of this valley, depopulated and wild; but, however great a solitude any land may be, it is still locally and administratively annexed to and owned by the town which it is municipality. Ruscino and its valley were dependent on San Beda; these two other communes were respectively under a little town of the Abruzzi and under a seaport of the Adriatic.

The interest of the valley of the Edera in its eponymous stream was the largest share; but it was not more than a share in this gift of nature. If it came to any question of conflicting interests, Ruscino and the valley might very likely be powerless, and could only, in any event, be represented by and through San Beda; a strongly ecclesiastical and papal little place, and therefore, without influence with the ruling powers, and

consequently viewed with an evil eye by the Prefecture.

He pondered anxiously on the matter for some days, then, arduous as the journey was, he resolved to go to San Beda and inquire.

The small mountain city was many miles away upon a promontory of marble rocks, and its many spires and towers were visible only in afternoon light from the valley of the Edera. It was as old as Ruscino, a dull, dark, very ancient place with monasteries and convents like huge fortresses and old palaces still fortified and grim as death amongst them. A Cistercian monastery, which had been chiefly builded by the second Giulio, crowned a prominent cliff, which dominated the town, and commanded a view of the whole of the valley of the Edera, and, on the western horizon, of the Leonessa and her tributary mountains and hills.

He had not been there for five years; he went on foot, for there was no other means of transit, and if there had been he would not have wasted money on it; the way was long and irksome; for the latter half, entirely up a steep mountain road. He started in the early morning as soon as mass had been celebrated, and it was four in the afternoon before he had passed the gates of the town. He rested in the Certosa, of which the superior was known to him, and made his first inquiries amongst the monks; they had heard nothing. So

far as he could learn when he went into the streets no one in the place had heard anything of the project to alter the course of the river. He made the return journey by night so as to reach his church by daybreak, and was there in his place by the high altar when the bell tolled at six o'clock, and the three or four old people, who never missed an office, were kneeling on the stones.

He had walked over forty miles and had eaten nothing except some bread and a piece of dried fish. But he always welcomed physical fatigue; it served to send to sleep the restless intellect, the gnawing regrets, the bitter sense of wasted powers and of useless knowledge which were his daily company.

He had begged his friends, the friars, to obtain an interview with the Syndic of San Beda, and interrogate him on the subject. Until he should learn something positive he could not bring himself to speak of the matter to Adone: but the fact of his unusual absence had too much astonished his little community for the journey not to have been the talk of Ruscino. Surprised and disturbed like others, Adone was waiting for him in the sacristy after the first mass.

"You have been away a whole day and night and never told me, reverendissimo!" he cried in reproach and amazement.

"I have yet to learn that you are my keeper,"

said Don Silverio with a cold and caustic intonation.

Adone coloured to the roots of his curling hair.

"That is unkind, sir!" he said humbly; "I only meant that—that——"

"I know, I know!" said the priest impatiently, but with contrition. "You meant only friendship and good-will; but there are times when the best intentions irk one. I went to see the Prior of the Certosa, an old friend; I had business in San Beda."

Adone was silent, afraid that he had shown an unseemly curiosity; he saw that Don Silverio was irritated and not at ease, and he hesitated what words to choose.

His friend relented, and blamed himself for being hurried by disquietude into harshness.

"Come and have a cup of coffee with me, my son," he said in his old, kind tones. "I am going home to break my fast."

But Adone was hurt and humiliated, and made excuse of field work, which pressed by reason of the weather, and so he did not name to his friend and councillor the visit of the three men to the river.

Don Silverio went home and boiled his coffee; he always did this himself; it was the only luxury he ever allowed himself, and he did not indulge even in this very often. But for once the draught

had neither fragrance nor balm for him. He was overtired, weary in mind as in body, and greatly dejected; even though nothing was known at San Beda he felt convinced that what he had read was the truth.

He knew but little of affairs of speculation, but he knew that it was only in reason to suppose that such projects would be kept concealed, as long as might be expedient, from those who would be known to be hostile to them, in order to minimize the force of opposition.

VI

On the morning of the fourth day which followed on the priest's visit to San Beda, about ten in the forenoon, Adone, with his two oxen, Orlando and Rinaldo were near the river on that part of his land which was still natural moorland, and on which heather, and ling, and broom, and wild roses, and bracken grew together. He had come to cut a waggon load of furze, and had been at work there since eight o'clock, when he had come out of the great porch of the church after attending mass, for it was the twentieth of June, the name-day of Don Silverio.

Scarcely had that day dawned when Adone had risen and had gone across the river to the presbytery, bearing with him a dozen eggs, two flasks of his best wine, and a bunch of late-flowering roses. They were his annual offerings on this day; he felt some trepidation as he climbed the steep, stony, uneven street lest they should be rejected, for he was conscious that three evenings before he had offended Don Silverio, and had left the presbytery too abruptly. But his fears were allayed as soon as he entered the house;

the vicar was already up and dressed, and was about to go to the church. At the young man's first contrite words Don Silverio stopped him with a kind smile.

"I was impatient and to blame," he said as he took the roses. "You heap coals of fire on my head, my son, with your welcome gifts."

Then together they had gone to the quaint old church of which the one great bell was tolling.

Mass over, Adone had gone home, broken his fast, taken off his velvet jacket, his long scarlet waistcoat, and his silver-studded belt, and put the oxen to the pole of the waggon.

"Shall I come?" cried Nerina.

"No," he answered. "Go and finish cutting the oats in the triangular field."

Always obedient, she went, her sickle swinging to her girdle. She was sorry, but she never murmured.

Adone had been at work amongst the furze two hours when old Pierino, who always accompanied the oxen, got up, growled, and then barked.

"What is it, old friend?" asked Adone, and left off his work and listened. He heard voices by the waterside and steps on the loose shingle of its shrunken summer bed. He went out of the wild growth round him and looked. There were four men standing and talking by the water. They were doubtless the same persons as Nerina

had seen, for they were evidently men from a city and strangers. Disquietude and offence took alarm in him at once.

He conquered that shyness which was natural to him, and which was due to the sensitiveness of his temperament and the solitude in which he had been reared.

"Excuse me, sirs," he said, as he advanced to them with his head uncovered; "what is it you want with my river?"

"Your river!" repeated the head of the group, and he smiled. "How is it more yours than your fellows?"

Adone advanced nearer.

"The whole course of the water belonged to my ancestors," he answered, "and this portion at least is mine now; you stand on my ground. I ask you what is your errand?"

He spoke with courtesy, but in a tone of authority which seemed to the intruders imperious and irritating. But they controlled their annoyance; they did not wish to offend this haughty young peasant.

"To be owner of the water it is necessary to own both banks of it," the stranger replied politely, but with some impatience. "The opposite bank is communal property. Do not fear, however, whatever your rights may be they will be carefully examined and considered."

"By whom? They concern only myself."

"None of our rights concern only ourselves. What are those which you claim in especial on the Edera water?"

Adone was silent for a few moments; he was astonished and embarrassed; he had never reflected on the legal side of his claim to the river; he had grown up in love and union with it; such affections, born with us at birth, are not analysed until they are assailed.

"You are strangers," he replied. "By what right do you question me? I was born here. What is your errand?"

"You must be Adone Alba?" said this person, as if spokesman for the others.

"I am."

"And you own the land known as the Terra Vergine?"

"I do."

"You will hear from us in due course, then. Meantime——"

"Meantime you trespass on my ground. Leave it, sirs."

The four strangers drew away a few paces and conferred together in a low tone, consulting a sheaf of papers. Their council over, he who appeared the most conspicuous in authority turned again to the young man, who was watching them with a vague apprehension which he could not explain to himself.

"There is no question of trespass; the riverside is free to all," said the stranger, with some contempt. "Courtesy would become you better, Ser Adone."

Adone coloured. He knew that courtesy was at all times wise and useful and an obligation amongst men; but his anger was stronger than his prudence and his vague alarm was yet stronger still.

"Say your errand with the water," he replied imperiously. "Then I can judge of it. No one, sirs, comes hither against my will."

"You will hear from us in due time," answered the intruder. "And believe me, young man, you may lose much, you cannot gain anything by rudeness and opposition."

"Opposition to what?"

The stranger turned his back upon him, rolled up his papers, spoke again with his companions, and lifted from a large stone on which he had placed it a case of surveyor's instruments. Adone went close up to him. "Opposition to what? What is it you are doing here?"

"We are not your servants," said the gentleman with impatience. "Do not attempt any brawling I advise you; it will tell against you and cannot serve you in any way."

"The soil and the water are mine, and you meddle with them," said Adone. "If you were

honest men you would not be ashamed of what you do, and would declare your errand. Brawling is not in my habit; but either speak clearly, or get you gone, or I will drive my oxen over you. The land and the waters are mine."

The chief of the group gave a disdainful, incredulous gesture, but the others pulled him by the sleeve and argued with him in low tones and a strange tongue, which Adone thought was German. The leader of the group was a small man with a keen, mobile face and piercing eyes; he did not yield easily to the persuasions of his companions; he was disposed to be combative; he was offended by what seemed to him the insults of a mere peasant.

Adone went back to his oxen, who were standing dozing with drooped heads; he gathered up the reins of rope and mounted the waggon, raising the drooped heads of the beasts. He held his goad in his hand; the golden gorze was piled behind him; he was in full sunlight, his hair was lifted by the breeze from his forehead; his face was flushed and set and stern. They saw that he would keep his word and drive down on to them, and make his oxen knock them down and the wheels grind their bodies into pulp. They had no arms of any kind, they felt they had no choice but to submit: and did so, with sore reluctance.

"He looks like a young god," said one of them

with an angry laugh. "Mortals cannot fight against the gods."

With discomfiture they retreated before him and went along the grassy path northward, as Nerina had seen them do on the day of their first arrival.

So far Adone had conquered.

But no joy or pride of a victor was with him. He stood and watched them pass away with a heavy sense of impending ill upon him; the river was flowing joyously, unconscious of its doom, but on him, though he knew nothing and conceived nothing of the form which the approaching evil would take, a great weight of anxiety descended.

He got down from the waggon when he had seen them disappear, and continued his uninterrupted work amongst the furze; and he remained on the same spot long after the waggon was filled, lest in his absence the intruders should return. Only when the sun set did he turn the heads of the oxen homeward.

He said nothing to the women, but when he had stalled and fed his cattle he changed his leathern breeches and put a clean shirt on his back, and went down the twilit fields and across the water to Ruscino; he told his mother that he would sup with Don Silverio.

When Adone entered the book-room his friend

was seated at a deal table laden with volumes and manuscripts, but he was neither writing or reading, nor had he lighted his lamp. The moonlight shone through the vine climbing up and covering the narrow window. He looked up and saw by Adone's countenance that something was wrong.

"What are they coming for, sir, to the river?" said the young man as he uncovered his head on the threshold of the chamber. Don Silverio hesitated to reply; in the moonlight his features looked like a mask of a dead man, it was so white and its lines so deep.

"Why do they come to the river, these strangers?" repeated Adone. "They would not say. They were on my land. I threatened to drive my cattle over them. Then they went. But can you guess, sir, why they come?"

Don Silverio still hesitated. Adone repeated his question with more insistence; he came up to the table and leaned his hands upon it, and looked down on the face of his friend.

"Why do they come?" he repeated a fourth time. "They must have some reason. Surely you know?"

"Listen, Adone, and control yourself," said Don Silverio.

"I saw something in a journal a few days ago which made me go to San Beda. But there they knew nothing at all of what the news-

paper had stated. What I said startled and alarmed them. I begged the Prior to acquaint me if he heard of any scheme affecting us. To-day only, he has sent a young monk over with a letter to me, for it was only yesterday that he heard that there is a project in Rome to turn the river out of its course, and use it for hydraulic power; to what purpose he does not know. The townsfolk of San Beda are in entire sympathy with this district and against the scheme, which will only benefit a foreign syndicate. That is all I know, for it is all he knows; he took his information direct from the syndic, Count Corradini. My boy, my dear boy, control yourself!"

Adone had dropped down on a chair, and leaning his elbow on the table hid his face upon his hands. A tremor shook his frame from head to foot.

"I knew it was some devilry," he muttered. "Oh, Lord! oh, Lord! would that I had made the oxen trample them into a thousand pieces! They ought never to have left my field alive!"

"Hush, hush!" said the priest sternly. "I cannot have such language in my house. Compose yourself."

Adone raised his head; his eyes were alight as with fire; his face was darkly red.

"What, sir! You tell me the river is to be taken away from us, and you ask me to be calm!

It is not in human nature to bear such a wrong in peace. Take away the Edera! Take away the water! They had better cut our throats. What! a poor wretch who steals a few grapes off a vine, a few eggs from a hen roost, is called a thief and hounded to the galleys, and such robbery as this is to be borne in silence because the thieves wear broadcloth! It cannot be. It cannot be; I swear it shall never be whilst I have life. The river is mine. We reigned here a thousand years and more; you have told me so. It is written there on the parchments. I will hold my own."

Don Silverio was silent; he was silent from remorse. He had told Adone what, without him Adone would have lived and died never knowing or dreaming. He had thought only to stimulate the youth to gentle conduct, honourable pride, perhaps to some higher use of his abilities: no more than this.

He had never seen the young man thus violent and vehement; he had always found him tranquil to excess, difficult to rouse, slow to anger, indeed almost incapable of it; partaking of the nature of the calm and docile cattle with whom so much of his time was passed. But under the spur of an intolerable menace the warrior's blood which slumbered in Adone leapt to action; all at once the fierce temper of the lords of Ruscino displayed its fire and its metal; it was not the peasant of

the Terra Vergine who was before him now, but the heir of the siegneury of the Rocca.

"It is not only what I told him of his race," he thought. "If he had known nothing, none the less would the blood in his veins have stirred and the past have moved him."

Aloud he said:

"My son, I feel for you from the depths of my soul. I feel with you also. For if these foreigners take the river-water from us what will become of my poor, desolate people, only too wretched already as they are? You would not be alone in your desperation, Adone. But do not let us take alarm too quickly. This measure is in gestation; but it may never come to birth. Many such projects are discussed which from one cause or another are not carried out; this one must pass through many preliminary phases before it becomes fact. There must be surely many vested rights which cannot with impunity be invaded. Take courage. Have patience."

He paused, for he saw that for the first time since they had known each other, Adone was not listening to him.

Adone was staring up at the moon which hung, golden and full, in the dark blue sky, seeming framed in the leaves and coils of the vine.

"The river is mine," he muttered. "The river

and I are as brothers. They shall kill me before they touch the water."

"He will go mad or commit some great crime," thought his friend, looking at him. "We must move every lever and strain every nerve, to frustrate this scheme, to prevent this spoliation. But if the thieves see money in it who shall stay their hands?"

He rose and laid his hands on Adone's shoulders.

"To-night you are in no fitting state for calm consideration of this possible calamity. Go home, my son. Go to your room. Say nothing to your mother. Pray and sleep. In the forenoon come to me and we will speak of the measures which it may be possible to take to have this matter examined and opposed. We are very poor; but still we are not altogether helpless. Only, there must be no violence. You wrong yourself and you weaken a good cause by such wild threats. Good night, my son. Go home."

The long habit of obedience to his superior, and the instinctive docility of his temper compelled Adone to submit; he drew a long, deep breath and the blood faded from his face.

Without a word he turned from the table and went out of the presbytery into the night and the white glory of the moonshine.

VII

Don Silverio drew to him his unfinished letter to the Prior; the young monk who would take it back in the morning to San Beda was already asleep in a little chamber above. But he could not write, he was too perturbed and too anxious. Although he had spoken so calmly he was full of carking care; both for the threatened evil itself and its effect upon his parishioners and especially upon Adone. He knew that in this age it is more difficult to check the devouring monster of commercial covetousness than it ever was to stay the Bull of Crete; and that for a poor and friendless community to oppose a strong and wealthy band of speculators is indeed for the wooden lance to shiver to atoms on the brazen shield.

He left his writing table and extinguished his lamp. Bidding the little dog lie still upon his chair, he went through the house to a door which opened from it into the bell tower of his church and which allowed him to go from the house to the church without passing out into the street. He climbed the belfry stairs once more, lighting himself at intervals by striking a wooden

match; for through the narrow loopholes in the walls the moonbeams did not penetrate. He knew the way so well that he could have gone up and down those rotting stairs even in total darkness, and he safely reached the platform of the bell tower, though one halting step might have sent him in that darkness head foremost to his death.

He stood there and gazed downwards on the moonlit landscape far below, over the roofs and the walls of the village towards the open fields and the river, with beyond that the wooded country and the cultured land known as the Terra Vergine, and beyond those again the moors, the marshes, and the mountains. The moonlight shone with intense clearness on the waters of the Edera and on the stone causeway of the old one-arched bridge. On the bridge there was a figure moving slowly; he knew it to be that of Adone. Adone was going home.

He was relieved from the pressure of one immediate anxiety, but his apprehensions for the future were great, both for the young man and for the people of Ruscino and its surrounding country. To take away their river was to deprive them of the little which they had to make life tolerable and to supply the means of existence. Like all riverain people, they depended chiefly on the water, on its fish, its osiers, its sedges, its sallows, its flags, its sand; and its various branches

and its winter overflow nourished the fields which they owned around it, and the only corn-mill of the district worked by a huge wheel in its water. If the river were turned out of its course above Ruscino the whole of this part of the vale would be made desolate.

Life was already hard for the human creatures in these fair scenes on which he looked; without the river their lot would be famine, would be death.

"Forbid it, oh, Lord! forbid this monstrous wrong," he said, as he stood with bared head under the starry skies.

When the people of a remote place are smitten by a public power the blow falls on them as unintelligible in its meaning, as invisible in its agency, as a thunderbolt is to the cattle whom it slays in their stalls. Even Don Silverio, with his classic culture and his archæological learning, had little comprehension of the means and methods by which these enterprises were combined and carried out; the world of commerce and speculation is as aloof from the scholar and the recluse as the rings of Saturn or the sun of Aldebaran. Its mechanism, its intentions, its combinations, its manners of action, its ways of expenditure, its intrigues with banks and governments: all these to men who dwell in rural solitudes, aloof from the babble of crowds, are utterly unknown; the

very language of the Bourses has no more meaning to them than the jar of wheels or roar of steam.

He stood and looked with a sinking heart on the quiet, moonlit country, and the winding course of the water where it flowed, now silvery in the light, now black in the gloom, passing rapidly through the heather and the willows under the gigantic masses of the Etruscan walls. It seemed to him to the full as terrible as to Adone; but it did not seem to him so utterly impossible, because he knew more of the ways of men and of their unhesitating and immeasurable cruelty whenever their greed was excited. If the fury of speculation saw desirable prey in the rape of the Edera then the Edera was doomed like the daughter of Ædipus or the daughter of Jephtha.

Adone had gone across the bridge, but he had remained by the waterside.

"Pray and sleep!" Don Silverio had said in his last words. But to Adone it seemed that neither prayer nor sleep would ever come to him again so long as this impending evil hung over him and the water of the Edera.

He spent the first part of the summer night wandering aimlessly up and down his own bank, blind to the beauty of the moonlight, deaf to the songs of the nightingales, his mind filled with one thought. An hour after midnight he went home

and let himself into the silent house by a small door which opened at the back, and which he used on such rare occasions as he stayed out late. He struck a match and went up to his room, and threw himself, dressed, upon his bed. His mother was listening for his return, but she did not call to him. She knew he was a man now, and must be left to his own will.

"What ails Adone that he is not home?" had asked old Gianna. Clelia Alba had been herself perturbed by his absence at that hour, but she had answered:

"What he likes to tell, he tells. Prying questions make false tongues. I have never questioned him since he was breeched."

"There are not many women like you," had said Gianna, partly in admiration, half in impatience.

"Adone is a boy for you and me," had replied his mother. "But for himself and for all others he is a man. We must remember it."

Gianna had muttered mumbled, rebellious words; he did not seem other than a child to her; she had been one of those present at his birth on the shining sands of the Edera.

He could not sleep. He could only listen to the distant murmur of the river. With dawn the women awoke. Nerina came running down the steep stone stair and went to let out and feed her charges, the fowls. Gianna went to the well in

the court with her bronze pitcher and pail. Clelia Alba cut great slices of bread at the kitchen table and hooked the cauldron of maize flour to the chain above the fire on the kitchen hearth. He could not wait for their greetings, their questions, the notice which his changed mien would surely attract. For the first time in all his twenty-four years of life he went out of the house without a word to his mother, and took his way to the river again; for the first time he was neglectful of his cattle and forgetful of the land.

Nerina came in from the fowl-house with alarm on her face.

"Madama Clelia!" she said timidly, "Adone has gone away without feeding and watering the oxen. May I do it?"

"Can you manage them, little one?"

"Oh, yes; they love me."

"Go then; but take care."

"She is a good child!" said Gianna. "The beasts won't hurt her. They know their friends."

Clelia Alba, to whom her own and her son's dignity was dear, said nothing of her own displeasure and surprise at Adone's absence. But she was only the more distressed by it. Never since he had been old enough to work at all had he been missing in the hours of labour.

"I only pray," she thought, "that no woman may have hold of him."

Adone hardly knew what he did; he was like a

man who has had a blow on the temple; his sight was troubled; his blood seemed to burn in his brain. He wandered from habit through the fields and down to the river, to the spot where from his infancy he had been used to bathe. He took off his clothes and waded into the water, which was cold as snow after the night. The shock of the cold and the sense of the running current laving his limbs, restored him in a measure to himself. He swam down the stream in the shadow of the early morning. The air was full of the scent of dog-roses and flowering thyme; he turned on his back and floated; between him and the sky a hawk passed; the bell of the church was tolling for the diurnal mass. He ran along in the sun as it grew warm, to dry his skin by movement, as his wont was. He was still stupefied by the fear which had fallen upon him; but the water had cooled and braced him.

He had forgotten his mother, the cattle, the labours awaiting him; his whole mind was absorbed in this new horror sprung up in his path, none knew from where, or by whom begotten. The happy, unconscious stream ran singing at his feet as the nightingale sang in the acacia thickets, its brown mountain water growing green and limpid as it passed over submerged grass and silver sand.

How could any thieves conspire to take it from the country in which it was born? How could

any dare to catch it and imprison it and put it to vile uses? It was a living thing, a free thing, a precious thing, more precious than jewel or gold. Both jewels and gold the law protected. Could it not protect the Edera?

"Something must be done," he said to himself. "But what?"

He had not the faintest knowledge of what could or should be done; he regretted that he had not written his mark with the horns and the hoofs of his oxen on the foreign invaders; they might never again fall into his power.

He had never felt before such ferocious or cruel instincts as arose in him now. Don Silverio seemed to him tame and lukewarm before this monstrous conspiracy of strangers. He knew that a priest must not give way to anger; yet it seemed to him that even a priest should be roused to fury here; there was a wrath which was holy.

When he was clothed he stood and looked down at the gliding stream.

A feeble, cracked voice called to him from the opposite bank.

"Adone, my lad, what is this tale?"

The speaker was an old man of eighty odd years, a native of Ruscino, one Patrizio Cambi, who was not yet too feeble to cut the rushes and osiers, and maintained a widowed daughter and her young children by that means.

"What tale?" said Adone, unwilling to be

roused from his own dark thoughts. "What tale, Trizio?"

"That they are going to meddle with the river," answered the old man. "They can't do it, can they?"

"What have you heard?"

"That they are going to meddle with the river."

"In what way?"

"The Lord knows, or the devil. There was a waggon with four horses came as near as it could get to us in the woods yonder by Ruffo's, and the driver told Ruffo that the gentry he drove had come by road from that town by the sea—I forget its name—in order to see the river, this river, our river, and that he had brought another posse of gentry two weeks or more on the same errand, and that they were a-measuring and a-plumbing it, and that they were going to get possession of it somehow or other, but Ruffo could not hear anything more than that; and I supposed that you knew, because this part of it is yours if it be any man's; this part of it that runs through the Terra Vergine."

"Yes, it is mine," answered Adone very slowly. "It is mine here, and it was once ours from source to sea."

"Aye, it is ours!" said old Trizio Cambi mistaking him. He was a man once tall, but now nearly bent double; he had a harsh wrinkled face,

brown as a hazel nut, and he was nearly a skeleton; but he had eyes which were still fine and still had some fire in them. In his youth he had been a Garibaldino.

"It is ours," repeated Trizio. "At least if anything belongs to poor folks. What say you, Adone?"

"Much belongs to the poor, but others take it from them," said Adone. "You have seen a hawk take a sparrow, Trizio. The poor count no more than the sparrows."

"But the water is the gift of God," said the old man.

Adone did not answer.

"What can we do?" said Trizio, wiping the dew off his sickle. "Who knows aught of us? Who cares? If the rich folks want the river they will take it, curse them!"

Adone did not answer. He knew that it was so, all over the earth.

"We shall know no more than birds tangled in a net," said Trizio. "They will come and work their will."

Adone rose up out of the grass. "I will go and see Ruffo," he said. He was glad to do something.

"Ruffo knows no more than that," said Trizio angrily. "The driver of the horses knew no more."

Adone paid him no heed, but began to push his

way through the thick network of the interlaced heather. He thought that perhaps Ruffo, a man who made wooden shoes and hoops for casks and shaped chestnut poles for vines, might tell him more than had been told to old Trizio; might at least be able to suggest from what quarter and in what shape this calamity was rising to burst over their valley as a hailstorm broods above, then breaks on helpless fields and defenceless gardens, beating down without warning the birds and the blossoms of spring.

When he had been in Lombardy he had seen once a great steam-engine at work, stripping a moorland of its natural growth and turning it into ploughed land. He remembered how the huge machine with its stench of oil and fire had forced its way through the furze and ferns and wild roses and myrtle, and torn them up and flung them on one side, and scattered and trampled all the insect life and all the bird life and all the hares and field mice and stoats and hedgehogs who made their home there. "A fine sight," a man had said to him; and he had answered, "a cursed wickedness." Was this what they would do to the vale of Edera? If they took the river they could not spare the land. He felt scared, bruised, terrified, like one of these poor moorland hares. He remembered a poor stoat who, startled out of its sleep, had turned and bitten one of the

iron wheels of the machine, and the wheel had gone over it and crushed it into a mass of blood and fur. He was as furious and as helpless as the stoat had been.

When he had walked the four miles which separated the Terra Vergine from the chestnut woods where the maker of wooden shoes lived, he heard nothing else from Ruffo than this: that gentlemen had come from Teramo to study the Edera water; they were going to turn it aside and use it; more than that the man who had driven them had not heard and could not explain.

"There were four horses, and he had nothing to give them but water and grass," said the cooper. "The gentry brought wine and food for themselves. They came the day before yesterday and slept here. They went away this morning. They paid me well, oh, very well. I did what I could for them. It is five-and-twenty miles if one off Teramo, aye, nearer thirty. They followed the old posting road; but you know where it enters the woods it is all overgrown and gone to rack and ruin from want of use. In my grandfather's time it was a fine well-kept highway, with post-houses every ten miles, though a rare place for robbery, but nowadays nobody wants it at all, for nobody comes or goes. It will soon be blocked, so the driver says: it will soon be quite choked-up what with brambles, and rocks, and fallen trees,

and what not. He was black with rage, for he was obliged to go back as he had come, and he said he had been cheated into the job."

Adone listened wearily to the garrulous Ruffo, who emphasised each phrase with a blow of his little hammer on a shoe. He had wasted all his morning hours and learned nothing. He felt like a man who is lost in a strange and deserted country at night; he could find no clue, could see no light. Perhaps if he went to the seaport town which was the Prefecture, he might hear something?

But he had never left the valley of the Edera except for that brief time which he had passed under arms in the north. He felt that he had no means, no acquaintance, no knowledge, whereby he could penetrate the mystery of this scheme. He did not even know the status of the promoters, or the scope of their speculation. The city was a port on the Adriatic with considerable trade to the Dalmatian and Greek coasts, but he scarcely knew its name. If he went there what could he do or learn? Would the stones speak, or the waves tell that which he thirsted to know? What use was the martial blood in his veins? He could not strike an invisible foe.

"Don't go to meet trouble half way," said the man Ruffo, meaning well. "I may have mistaken the driver. They cannot take hold of a river, how

should they? Water slips through your fingers. Where it was set running in the beginning of the world, there it will go on running till the crack of doom. Let them look; let them prate; they can't take it."

But Adone's reason would not allow him to be so consoled.

He understood a little of what hydraulic science can compass; he knew what canalisation meant, and its assistance to traffic and trade; he had seen the waterworks on the Po, on the Adige, on the Mincio; he had heard how the Velino had been enslaved for the steel foundry of Terni, how the Nerino fed the ironworks of Narni; he had seen the Adda captive at Lodi, and the lakes held in bond at Mantua; he had read of the water drawn from Monte Amiata, and not very many miles off him in the Abruzzo was the hapless Fuscino, which had been emptied and dried up by rich meddlers of Rome.

He knew also enough of the past to know how water had been forced to serve the will and the wants of the Roman Consulate and the Roman Empire, of how the marble aqueducts had cast the shadow of their arches over the land, and how the provinces had been tunnelled and bridged and canalised and irrigated during two thousand years by those whose bones were dust under the Latin soil. He could not wholly

cheat himself as these unlettered men could do; he knew that if the commerce which had succeeded the Cæsars as ruler of the world coveted the waters of Edera, the river was lost to the home of its birth and to him.

"How shall I tell my mother?" he asked himself as he walked back through the fragrant and solitary country. He felt ashamed at his own helplessness and ignorance. If courage could have availed anything he would not have been wanting; but all that was needed here was a worldly and technical knowledge, of which he possessed no more than did the trout in the stream.

As he neared his home, pushing his way laboriously through the interlaced bracken which had never been cut for a score of years, he saw approaching him the tall, slender form of Don Silverio, moving slowly, for the heather was breast high, his little dog barking at a startled wood-pigeon.

"They are anxious about you at your house," Don Silverio said with some sternness. "Is it well to cause your mother this disquietude?"

"No, it is not well," replied Adone. "But how can I see her and not tell her, and how can I tell her this thing?"

"Women to bear trouble are braver than men," said the priest. "They have more patience in pain than we. I have said something to her; but

we need not yet despair. We know nothing of any certainty. Sometimes such schemes are abandoned at the last moment because too costly or too unremunerative. Sometimes they drag on for half a lifetime; and at the end nothing comes of them."

"You have told my mother?"

"I told her what troubles you, and made you leave your work undone. The little girl was feeding the cattle."

Adone coloured. He was conscious of the implied rebuke.

"Sir," he said in a low tone, "if this accursed thing comes to pass what will become of us? What I said in my haste last night I say in cold reason to-day."

"Then you are wrong, and you will turn a calamity into a curse. Men often do so."

"It is more than a calamity."

"Perhaps. Would not some other grief be yet worse? If you were stricken with blindness?"

"No; I should still hear the river running."

Don Silverio looked at him. He saw by the set, sleepless, reckless look on his face that the young man was in no mood to be reached by any argument, or to be susceptible to either rebuke or consolation. The time might come when he would be so; but that time was far off, he feared. The evenness, the simplicity, the loneliness of

Adone's existence, made it open to impressions, and absorbed by them, as busy and changeful lives never are; it was like the heather plants around them, it would not bear transplanting; its birthplace would be its tomb.

"Let us go back to your mother," he said. "Why should you shun her? What you feel she feels also. Why leave her alone?"

"I will go home," said Adone.

"Yes, come home. You must see that there is nothing to be done or to be learned as yet. When they know anything fresh at San Beda they will let me know. The Prior is a man of good faith."

Adone turned on him almost savagely; his eyes were full of sullen anger.

"And I am to bear my days like this? Knowing nothing, hearing nothing, doing nothing to protect the water that is as dear to me as a brother, and the land which is my own? What will the land be without the river? You forget, sir, you forget!"

"No, I do not forget," said Don Silverio without offence. "But I ask you to hear reason. What can you possibly do? Think you no man has been wronged before you? Think you that you alone here will suffer? The village will be ruined. Do you feel for yourself alone?"

Adone seemed scarcely to hear. He was like a

man in a fever who sees one set of images and cannot see anything else.

"Sir," he said suddenly, "why will you not go to Rome?"

"To Rome?" echoed the priest in amazement.

"There alone can the truth of this thing be learned," said Adone. "It is to Rome that the promoters of this scheme must carry it; there to be permitted or forbidden as the Government chooses. All these things are brought about by bribes, by intrigues, by union. Without authority from high office they cannot be done. We here do not even know who are buying or selling us——"

"No, we do not," said Don Silverio; and he thought, "When the cart-horse is bought by the knacker what matter to him the name of his purchaser or his price?"

"Sir," said Adone, with passionate entreaty. "Do go to Rome. There alone can the truth be learnt. You, a learned man, can find means to meet learned people. I would go, I would have gone yesternight, but when I should get there I know no more than a stray dog where to go or from whom to inquire. They would see I am a country fellow. They would shut the doors in my face. But you carry respect with you. No one would dare to flout you. You could find ways

and means to know who moves this scheme, how far it is advanced, what chance there is of our defeating it. Go, I beseech you, go!"

"My son, you amaze me," said Don Silverio. "I? In Rome? I have not stirred out of this district for eighteen years. I am nothing. I have no voice. I have no weight. I am a poor rural vicar buried here for punishment."

He stopped abruptly, for no complaint of the injustice from which he suffered had ever in those eighteen years escaped him.

"Go, go," said Adone. "You carry respect with you. You are learned and will know how to find those in power and how to speak to them. Go, go! Have pity on all of us, your poor helpless menaced people."

Don Silverio was silent.

Was it now his duty to go into the haunts of men, as it had been his duty to remain shut up in the walls of Ruscino? The idea appalled him.

Accomplished and self-possessed though he was, his fine mind and his fine manners had not served wholly to protect him from that rust and nervousness which come from the disuse of society and the absence of intercourse with equals.

It seemed to him impossible that he could again enter cities, recall usages, seek out acquaintances, move in the stir of streets, and wait in antechambers.

That was the life of the world; he had done with it, forsworn it utterly, both by order of his superiors and by willing self-sacrifice. Yet he knew that Adone was right. It was only from men of the world and amongst them, it was only in the great cities that it was possible to follow up the clue of such speculations as now threatened the vale of Edera.

The young man he knew could not do what was needed, and certainly would get no hearing, a peasant of the Abruzzi border who looked like a figure of Giorgione's, and would probably be arrested as an anarchist if he were to endeavour to enter any great house or public office. But to go to Rome himself! To revisit the desecrated city! This seemed to him a pilgrimage impossible except for the holiest purpose. He felt as if the very stones of Trastevere would rise up and laugh at him, a country priest with the moss and the mould of a score of years passed in rural obscurity upon him. Moreover, to revisit Rome would be to tear open wounds long healed. There his studious youth had been passed, and there his ambitious dreams had been dreamed.

"I cannot go to Rome," he said abruptly. "Do not ask me, I cannot go to Rome."

"Then I will go," said Adone, "and if in no other way I will force myself into the king's palace and make him hear."

"And his guards will seize you, and his judges will chain you up in a solitary cell for life! Do not say such mad things. What could the king reply even if he listened, which he would not do? He would say that these things were for ministers and prefects and surveyors, and engineers to judge of not for him or you. Be reasonable, Adone; do not speak or act like a fool. This is the first grief you have known in your life, and you are distraught by it. That is natural enough, my poor boy. But you exaggerate the danger. It must be far off as yet. It is a mere project."

"And I am to remain here, tilling the land in silence and inaction until one day without notice I shall see a crowd of labourers at work upon the river, and shall see appraisers measuring my fields! You know that is how things are done. You know the poor are always left in the dark until all is ripe for their robbery. Look you, sir, if you go to Rome I will wait in such patience as I can for whatever you may learn. But if you do not go, I go, and if I can do no better I will take the king by the throat."

"I have a mind to take you by the throat myself," said Don Silverio, with an irritation which he found it hard to control. "Well, I will think over what you wish, and if I find it possible, if I think it justified, if I can afford the means, if I can obtain the permission for such a journey, I

will go to Rome; for your sake, for your mother's sake. I will let you know my decision later. Let us walk homeward. The sun is low. At your house the three women must be anxious."

Adone accompanied him in silence through the heather, of which the blossoming expanse was reddening in the light of the late afternoon until the land looked a ruby ocean. They did not speak again until they reached the confines of the Terra Vergine.

Then Don Silverio took the path which went through the pasture to the bridge, and Adone turned towards his own dwelling.

"Spare your mother. Speak gently," said the elder man; the younger man made a sign of assent and of obedience.

"He will go to Rome," said Adone to himself, and almost he regretted that he had urged the journey, for in his own veins the fever of unrest and the sting of fierce passions were throbbing, and he panted and pined for action. He was the heir of the lords of the river.

VIII

LIKE the cooper Ruffo, Clelia Alba had received the tidings with incredulity, though aghast at the mere suggestion.

"It is impossible," she said. She had seen the water there ever since she had been a babe in swaddling clothes.

"It is not possible," she said, "that any man could be profane enough to alter the bed which heaven had given it."

But she was sorely grieved to see the effect such a fear had upon Adone.

"I was afraid it was a woman," she thought; "but this thing, could it be true, would be worse than any harlot or adulteress. If they took away the river the land would perish. It lives by the river."

"The river is our own as far as we touch it," she said aloud to her son; "but it was the earth's before it was ours. To sever water from the land it lives in were worse than to snatch a child from its mother's womb."

Adone did not tell her that water was no more sacred than land to the modern constructor. She

would learn that all too soon if the conspiracy against the Edera succeeded. But he tried to learn from her what legal rights they possessed to the stream: what had his father thought? He knew well that his old hereditary claim to the Lordship of Ruscino, however capable of proof, would be set aside as fantastic and untenable; but their claim to the water through the holding of Terra Vergine could surely not be set aside.

"Your father never said aught about the water that I can remember," she answered. "I think he would no more have thought it needful to say it was his than to say that you were his son. It is certain we are writ down in the district as owners of the ground; we pay taxes for it; and the title of the water must be as one with that."

"So say I; at least over what runs through our fields we alone have any title, and for that title I will fight to the death," said Adone. "River rights go with the land through which the river passed."

"But, my son," she said with true wisdom, "your father would never have allowed any danger to the water to make him faithless to the land. If you let this threat, this dread, turn you away from your work, if you let your fears make you neglect your fields and your olives, and your cattle and your vines, you will do more harm to yourself than the worst enemy can do you. To

leave a farm to itself is to call down the vengeance of heaven. A week's abandonment undoes the work of years. I and Gianna and the child do what we can, but we are women, and Nerina is young."

"I will do what I can, mother," replied Adone humbly. "But of what use is it to dress and manure a vine, if the accursed phylloxera be in its sap and at its root? What use is it to till these lands if they be doomed to perish from thirst?"

"Do your best," said his mother, "then the fault will not lie with you, whatever happen."

The counsel was sound; but to Adone all savour and hope were gone out of his labour. When he saw the green gliding water shine through the olive branches and beyond the foliage of the walnut-trees his arms fell nerveless to his side, his throat swelled with sobs, which he checked as they rose, but which were only the more bitter for that—all the joy and the peace of his day's work were gone.

It was but a small space of it to one whose ancestors had reigned over the stream from its rise in the oak woods to its fall into the sea; but he thought that no one could dispute or diminish or disregard his exclusive possession of the Edera water where it ran through his fields. They could not touch that even if they seized it lower down where it ran through other communes. Were

they to take it above his land, above the bridge of Ruscino, its bed here would be dried up and his homestead and the village both be ruined. The clear, intangible right which he meant to defend at any cost, in any manner, was his right to have the river run untouched through his fields. The documents which proved the rights of the great extinct Seigneury might be useless, but the limited, shrunken right of the present ownership was as unassailable as his mother's right to the three strings of pearls; or so he believed.

The rights of the Lords of Ruscino might be but shadows of far-off things, things of tradition, of history, of romance, but the rights of the peasant proprietors of the Terra Vergine must, he thought, be respected if there were any justice upon earth, for they were plainly writ down in the municipal registers of San Beda. To rouse others to defend their equal rights in the same way from the source of the Edera to its union with the Adriatic seemed to him the first effort to be made. He was innocent enough to believe that it would suffice to prove that its loss would be their ruin to obtain redress at once.

Whilst Don Silverio was still hesitating as to what seemed to him this momentous and painful journey to Rome his mind was made up by a second letter received from the Superior of the Certosa at San Beda, the friend to whom he had

confided the task of inquiring as to the project for the Edera.

The letter was long, and in Latin. They were two classics, who liked thus to refresh themselves and each other with epistles such as St. Augustine or Tertullian might have penned. The letter was of elegant scholarship, but its contents were unwelcome. It said that the Most Honourable the Syndic of San Beda had enjoyed a conference with the Prefect of the province, and it had therein transpired that the project for the works upon the river Edera had been long well known to the Prefect, and that such project was approved by the existing Government, and therefore by all the Government officials, as was but natural. It was not admitted that the Commune of San Beda had any local interest or local right sufficiently strong to oppose the project, as such a claim would amount to a monopoly, and no monopoly could exist in a district through which a running river partially passed, and barely one-fifth of the course of this stream lay through that district known as the valley of the Edera. The entire Circondario except the valley, was believed to be in favour of the project, which the Prefect informed the Syndic could not be otherwise than most favourable to the general interests of the country at large.

"Therefore, most honoured and revered

friend," wrote the Superior of the Cistercians, his most esteemed worship does not see his way to himself suggest opposition to this course in our Town Council or in our Provincial Council, and the Most Worshipful the Assessors do not either see theirs; it being, as you know, an equivocal and onerous thing for either council to express or suggest in their assembly views antagonistic to those of the Prefecture, so that I fear, most honoured and reverend friend, it will not be in my power farther to press this matter, and I fear also that your parish of Ruscino being isolated and sparsely populated, and its chief area uncultivated, will be possessed of but one small voice in this matter, the interests of the greater number being always in such a case preferred."

Don Silverio read the letter twice, its stately and correct Latinity not serving to disguise the mean and harsh fact of its truly modern logic. "Because we are few and poor and weak we have no rights!" he said bitterly. "Because the water comes from others and goes to others it is not ours whilst in our land!"

He did not blame his friend at San Beda.

Ecclesiastics existed only on sufferance, and any day the Certosa might be closed if its inmates offended the ruling powers. But the letter, nevertheless, lay like a stone on his heart. All the harshness, the narrowness, the disregard of the

interests of the weak; the rude, rough, tyrannical pressing onward of the strong to their own selfish aims, all the characteristics of the modern world seemed to find voice in it and jeer at him.

It was not for the first time in his life that he had pressed against the iron gates of interest and formula and oppression, and only bruised his breast and torn his hands.

He had a little sum of money put by in case of illness and for his burial; that was the only fund on which he could draw to take him to Rome and keep him when there, and it was so small that it would soon be exhausted. He passed the best part of the night doubting which way his duty pointed. He fasted, prayed, and communed with his soul, and at length it seemed to him as if a voice from without said to him, "Take up your staff and go." For the journey appalled him, and where his inclination pointed he had taught himself to see error. He shrank inexpressibly from going into the noise and glare and crowd of men; he clung to his solitude as a timid criminal to its lair; and therefore he felt persuaded that he ought to leave Ruscino on his errand, because it was so acutely painful to him.

Whilst he was gone Adone at least would do nothing rash; would of course await the issue of his investigations. Time brings council, and time he hoped would in this instance befriend him. He

had already obtained the necessary permission to leave his parish; he then asked for a young friend from San Beda to take his place in the village; left his little dog to the care of Nerina; took his small hoard in a leathern bag strapped to his loins, and went on his way at daybreak along the south-west portion of the valley, to cover on foot the long distance which lay between him and the nearest place at which a public vehicle went twice a week to a railway station whence he could take the train to Terni and so to Rome.

Adone acccompanied him the first half of the way, but they said little to one another; their hearts were full. Adone could not forget the rebuke given to him, and Don Silverio was too wise a man to lean heavily on a sore and aching wound, or repeat counsels already given and rejected.

At the third milestone he stopped and begged, in a tone which was a command, the young man to return home.

"Do not leave your land for me," he said. "Every hour is of gold at this season. Go back, my son! I pray that I may bring you peace."

"Give me your blessing," said Adone meekly, and he knelt down in the dust of the roadside. His friend gave it; then their hands met in silent farewell.

The sun had risen, and the cold clear air was yielding to its rays. The young man reluctantly turned back, and left the priest to go onward alone, a tall, dark figure in the morning light; the river running between acacia thickets and rushes on his right. Before long he would be forced to leave the course of the stream, and ascend a rugged and precipitous road which mounted southward and westward through oak woods into the mountains between the Leonessa and Gran Sasso, until it reached a shrunken, desolate village, with fine Etruscan and Roman remains left to perish, and a miserable hostelry with the miserable diligences starting from it on alternate days, the only remains of its former posting activity. There he arrived late in the evening and broke his fast on a basin of bean soup, then rested on a bench, for he could not bring himself to enter the filthy bed which was alone to be obtained, and spent the following morning examining the ancient ruins, for the conveyance did not start until four o'clock in the afternoon. When that hour came he made one of the travellers; all country folks, who were packed close as pigeons in a crate in the ramshackle, noisy, broken-down vehicle, which lumbered on its way behind its lean and suffering horses through woods and hills and along mountain passes of a grandeur and a beauty on which the eyes of educated travellers rarely looked.

The journey by this conveyance occupied seven hours, and he was obliged to wait five more at that village station which was the nearest point at which he could meet the train which went from Terni to Rome. Only parliamentary trains stop at such obscure places; and this one seemed to him slower even than the diligence had been. It was crammed with country lads going to the conscription levy in the capital: some of them drunk, some of them noisy and quarrelsome, some in tears, some silent and sullen, all of them sad company. The dusty, stinking, sun-scorched waggons open one to another, with the stench of hot unwashed flesh, and the clouds of dust driven through the unglazed windows seemed to Don Silverio a hell of man's own making, and in remembrance his empty quiet room, with its vine-hung window, at Ruscino seemed by comparison a lost heaven.

To think that there were thousands of men who travelled thus every day of every year in every country, many of them from no obligation whatever, but from choice!

"What lunatics, what raving idiots we should look to Plato or to Socrates, could they see us!" he thought. Was what is called progress anything else except increased insanity in human life?

He leaned back in his corner and bore the dust in his eyes and his throat as best he might, and

spoke a few kind words to the boys nearest to him, and felt as if every bone in his body was broken as the wooden and iron cage shook him from side to side. The train stopped finally in that area of bricks and mortar and vulgarity and confusion where once stood the Baths of Diocletian. It was late in the night when he heard the name of Rome.

No scholar can hear that name without emotion. On him it smote with a keen personal pain, awakening innumerable memories, calling from their graves innumerable dreams.

He had left it a youth, filled with all the aspirations, the fire, the courage, the faith of a lofty and spiritual temper. He returned to it a man aged before his time, worn, weary, crushed, spiritless, with no future except death.

He descended from the waggon with the crowd of jaded conscripts and mingled with that common and cosmopolitan crowd which now defiles the city of the Cæsars. The fatigue of his body and the cramped pain of his aching spine added to the moral and the mental suffering which was upon him as he moved a stranger and alone along the new, unfamiliar streets where alone here and there some giant ruin, some stately arch, some marble form of god or prophet, recalled to him the Urbs that he had known.

But he remembered the mission on which he

came; and he rebuked his self-indulgence in mourning for his own broken fate.

"I am a faithless servant and a feeble friend," he thought in self-reproach. "Let me not weaken my poor remnant of strength in egotism and repining. I come hither for Adone and the Edera. Let me think of my errand only; not of myself, nor even of this desecrated city."

IX

It was now the season to plough the reapen fields, and he had always taken pleasure in his straight furrows—as straight as though measured by a rule on the level lands; and of the skill with which on the hilly ground Orlando and Rinaldo moved so skilfully, turning in so small a space, answering to every inflection of his voice, taking such care not to break a twig of the fruit trees, or bend a shoot of the vines, or graze a stem of the olives.

"Good hearts, dear hearts, faithful friends and trusty servants!" he murmured to the oxen. He leaned his bare arms on the great fawn-coloured flanks of Orlando, and his forehead on his arms, which grew wet with hidden tears.

The cattle stood motionless, breathing loudly through their distended nostrils, the yokes on their shoulders crinking, their hides twitching under the torment of the flies. Nerina, who had been washing linen in the Edera, approached through the olives; she hesitated a few minutes, then put the linen down off her head on to the grass, gathered some plumes of featherfew and

ferns, and brushed the flies off the necks of the oxen. Adone started, looked up in displeasure at being thus surprised, then, seeing the intruder was only the little girl, he sat down on the side of the plow, and made believe to break his noon-day bread.

"You have no wine," said the child,"shall I run to the house for a flask?"

"No, my dear, no. If I am athirst there is water—as yet there is water!" he murmured bitterly, for the menace of this impending horror began to grow on him with the fixity and obsession of a mania.

Nerina continued to fan the cattle and drive off the flies from their necks. She looked at him wistfully from behind the figures of the stately animals. She was afraid of the sorrow which was in the air. No one had told her what the evil was which hung over the Terra Vergine; and she never asked questions. The two elder women never took her into their confidence on any subject, and she had no communication with the few people in Ruscino. She had seen that something was wrong, but she could not guess what: something which made Madonna Clelia's brows dark, and Gianna's temper bad, and Adone himself weary and ill at ease.

Seeing him sitting there not eating, throwing his bread to some wild pigeons which followed the

plough, she plucked up courage to speak; he was always kind to her, though he noticed her little.

"What is it that ails you all?" she asked. "Tell me, Adone, I am not a foolish thing to babble."

He did not answer. What use were words: It was deeds which were wanted.

"Adone, tell me," she said entreatingly. "What is this that seems to lie like a stone on you all? Tell me why Don Silverio has gone away. I will never tell again."

There was a pathetic entreaty in the words which touched and roused him; there was in it the sympathy which would not criticise or doubt, and which is to the sore heart as balm and soothes it by its very lack of reason.

He told her; told her the little that he knew, the much that he feared; he spent all the force of his emotion in the narrative.

The child leaned against the great form of the ox, and listened, not interrupting by a word or cry.

She did not rebuke him as Don Silverio had done, or reproach him as did his mother; she only listened with a world of comprehension in her eyes more eloquent than speech, not attempting to arrest the fury of imprecation or the prophecies of vengeance which poured from his lips. Hers was that undoubting, undivided, implicit faith which is so dear to the wounded pride and im-

potent strength of a man in trouble who is conscious that what he longs to do would not be approved by law or sanctioned by religion. That faith spoke in her eyes, in her absorbed attention, in the few breathless sentences which escaped her; there was also on her youthful face a set, stern anger akin to his own.

"Could we not slay these men?" she said in a low, firm voice; she came of a mountain race by whom life was esteemed little and revenge honour.

"We must not even say such a thing," said Adone bitterly, in whose ears the rebuke of Don Silverio still rang. "In these days everything is denied us, even speech. If we take our rights we are caged in their prisons."

"But what will you do, then?"

"For the moment I wait to learn more. These things are done in the dark, or at least in no light that we can see. To kill these men as you wish, little one, would do nothing. Others of their kind would fill their places. The seekers of gold are like ants. Slay thousands, tens of thousands come on; if once the scent of gain be on the wind it brings men in crowds from all parts as the smell of carrion brings meat-flies. If they think of seizing the Edera it is because men of business will turn it into gold. The Edera gives us our grain, our fruits, our health, our life, but if it will give money to the foreigner the foreigner will

take it as he would take the stars and coin them if he could. The brigand of the hills is caged or shot; the brigand of the banks is allowed to fatten and die in the odour of success. There are two measures."

Nerina failed to understand, but her mind was busy with what seemed to her this monstrous injustice.

"But why do they let them do it? They take and chain the men who rob a traveller or a house."

Adone cast his last atom of bread to the birds.

"There are two measures," he answered. "Kill one, you go to the galleys for life. Kill half a million, you are a hero in history, and you get in your own generation titles, and money, and applause."

"Baruffo was a good man and my father's friend," Nerina said, following her own thoughts. "Baruffo was in the oak woods always, high above us, but he often brought us wine and game at night, and sometimes money too. Baruffo was a good man. He was so kind. Twice my father aided him to escape. But one night they seized him; there was a whole troop of carabineers against him, they took him in a trap, they could never have got him else, and I saw him brought down the mountain road and I ran and kissed him before they could stop me; and he never came back—they kept him."

"No doubt they kept him," said Adone bitterely. "Baruffo was a peasant outlawed; if he had been a banker, or a minister, or a railway contractor, he might have gone on thieving all his life, and met only praise. They keep poor Baruffo safe in their accursed prisons, but they will take care never to keep, or take even for a day, law-breakers whose sins are far blacker than his, and whose victims are multitudes."

"If Baruffo were here he would help you," said Nerina. "He was such a fine strong man and had no fear."

Adone rose and put his hands on the handles of the plough.

"Take up your linen, little one," he said to the girl, "and go home, or my mother will be angry with you for wasting time."

Nerina came close to him and her brown dog-like eyes looked up like a dog's into his face.

"Tell me what you do, Adone," she said beseechingly, "I will tell no one. I was very little when Baruffo came and went to and fro in our hut; but I had sense; I never spoke. Only when the guards had him I kissed him because then it did not matter what they knew; there was no hope."

"Yes, I will tell you," said Adone. "Maybe I shall end like Baruffo."

Then he called on Orlando and Rinaldo by

their names, and they lowered their heads and strained at their collars, and with a mighty wrench of their loins and shoulders they forced the share through the heavy earth.

Nerina stood still and looked after him as he passed along under the vine-hung trees.

"Baruffo may have done some wrong," she thought, "but Adone, he has done none, he is as good as if he were a saint of God, and if he should be obliged to do evil it will be no fault of his, but because other men are wicked."

Then she put the load of linen on her head, and went along the grassy path homeward, and she saw the rosy gladioli and the golden tansy by which she passed through tears. Yet she was glad because Adone had trusted her; and because she now knew as much as the elder women in his house who had put no confidence in her.

X

"I SHALL not write," Don Silverio had said to Adone. "As soon as I know anything for certain I shall return. Of that you may be sure."

For he knew that letters took a week or more to find their slow way to Ruscino, and he had hoped to return in less than that time; having no experience of "what hell it is in waiting to abide," and of the endless doublings and goings to earth of that fox-like thing, a modern speculation; he innocently believed that he would only have to ask a question to have it answered.

Day after day Adone mounted to the bell-tower roof and gazed over the country in vain. Day after day the little dog escaped from the custody of Nerina, trotted over the bridge, pattered up the street, and ran whining into his master's study. Every night the people of Ruscino hung up a lantern on a loophole of the belfry, and another on the parapet of the bridge, that their pastor might not miss his way if he were coming on foot beside the river; and every night Adone himself watched on the river bank or by the town wall, sleepless, longing for, yet dreading that which he should hear. But more than a

week passed, and the priest did not return. The anxiety of Adone consumed him like fire. He strove to dull his anxiety by incessant work, but it was too acute to be soothed by physical fatigue. He counted the days and the hours, and he could not sleep. The women watched him in fear and silence; they dared ask nothing, lest they should wound him. Only Nerina whispered to him once or twice in the fields, "Where is he gone? When will he come back?"

"God knows!" he answered. Every evening that he saw the sun set beyond the purple line of the mountains which were heaped in their masses of marble and snow between him and the Patrimonium Petrus, he felt as if he could never bear another night. He could hear the clear, fresh sound of the running river, and it seemed to him like the voice of some friend crying aloud to him in peril. Whilst these summer days and nights sped away what was being done to save it? He felt like a coward who stands by and sees a comrade murdered. In his solitude and apprehension he began to lose all self-control; he imagined impossible things; he began to see in his waking dreams, as in a nightmare, the dead body of Don Silverio lying with a knife in its breast in some cut-throat alley of Rome. For two weeks passed and there was no sign of his return and no message from him.

The poor people of Ruscino also were troubled. Their vicar had never left them before. They did not love him; he was too unlike them; but they honoured him, they believed in him; he was always there in their sickness and sorrow; they leaned on his greater strength in all their penury and need; and he was poor like them, and stripped himself still barer for their sakes.

Through the young friar who had replaced him they had heard something of the calamity which threatened to befall them through the Edera. It was all dark to them; they could understand nothing. Why others should want their river and why they should lose it, or in what manner a stream could be turned from its natural course—all these things were to them incomprehensible. In the beginning of the world it had been set running there. Who would be impious enough to meddle with it?

Whoever tried to do so would be smitten with the vengeance of Heaven. Of that they were sure. Nevertheless to hear the mention of such a thing tormented them; and when they opened their doors at dawn they looked out in terror lest the water should have been taken away in the night.

Their stupidity irritated Adone so greatly that he ceased altogether to speak to them of the impending calamity. "They are stocks and stones.

They have not the sense of sheep nor the courage of goats," he said, with the old scorn which his forefathers had felt for their rustic vassals stirring in him.

"I believe that they would dig sand and carry wood for the engineers and the craftsmen who would build the dykes!" he said to his mother.

Clelia Alba sighed. "My son, hunger is a hard master; it makes the soul faint, the heart hard, the belly ravenous. We have never known it. We cannot judge those who know nothing else."

"Even hunger need not make one vile," he answered.

But he did not disclose all his thoughts to his mother.

He was so intolerant of these poor people of Ruscino because he foresaw the hopelessness of forging their weak tempers into the metal necessary for resistance. As well might he hope to change a sword-rush of the river into a steel sabre for combat. Masaniello, Rienzi, Garibaldi, had roused the peasantry and led them against their foes; but the people they dealt with must, he thought, have been made of different stuff than these timorous villagers, who could not even be made to comprehend the magnitude of the wrong which was plotted against them.

"Tell them," he said to old Trizio; "tell them their wells will run dry; their fish will rot on the

dry bed of what was once the river; their canes, their reeds and rushes, their osiers, will all fail them; when they shall go out into their fields nothing which they sow or plant will grow because the land will be cracked and parched; there will be no longer the runlets and rivulets to water the soil; birds will die of thirst, and thousands of little river creatures will be putrid carcasses in the sun; for the Edera, which is life and joy and health to this part of the country, will be carried far away, imprisoned in brick walls, drawn under ground, forced to labour like a slave, put to vile uses, soiled and degraded. Cannot you tell them this, and make them see?"

The old man shook his white head. "They would never believe. It is too hard for them. Where the river runs, there it will always be. So they think."

"They are dolts, they are mules, they are swine!" said Adone. "Nay, may the poor beasts forgive me! The beasts cannot help themselves, but men can if they choose."

"Humph!" said Trizio doubtfully. "My lad, you have not seen men shot down by the hundred. I have—long ago, long ago."

"There is no chance of their being shot," said Adone, with contempt, almost with regret. "All that is wanted of them are common sense, union, protestation, comprehension of their rights."

"Aye, you all begin with that," said the old Garibaldino. "But, my lad, you do not end there, for it is just those things which are your right which those above you will never hear of; and then up come the cannon thundering, and when the smoke clears away there are your dead—and that is all you get."

The voice of the old soldier was thin and cracked and feeble, but it had a sound in it which chilled the hot blood of his hearer.

This was no revolutionary question, no socialistic theory, no new or alarming demand; it was only a claim old as the hills, only a resolve to keep what the formation of the earth had given to this province.

As well blame a father for claiming his own child as blame him and his neighbours for claiming their own river.

They were tranquil and docile people, poor and patient, paying what they were told to pay, letting the fiscal wolf gnaw and glut as it chose unopposed, not loving their rulers indeed, but never moving or speaking against them, accepting the snarl, the worry, the theft, the greed, the malice of the State without questioning.

Were they to stand by and see their river ruined, and do nothing, as the helpless fishermen of Fuscina have accepted the ruin of their lake?

To all young men of courage and sensibility

and enthusiasm the vindication of a clear right seems an act so simple that it is only through long and painful experience that they realise that there is nothing under the sun which is so hard to compass, or which is met by such strong antagonism. To Adone, whose nature was unspoilt by modern influences, and whose world was comprised in the fields and moors around Ruscino, it seemed incredible that such a title as that of his native soil to the water of Edera could be made clear to those in power without instant ratification of it.

"Whether you do aught or naught it comes to the same thing," said the old Garibaldino who was wiser. "We did much; we spent our blood like water, and what good has it been? For one devil we drove out before our muskets, a thousand worse devils have entered since."

"It is different," said Adone, impatient. "All we have to do is to keep out the stranger. You had to drive him out. No politics or doctrines come into our cause; all we mean, all we want, is to be left alone, to remain as we are. That is all. It is simple and just."

"Aye, it is simple; aye, it is just," said the old man; but he sucked his pipe-stem grimly; he had never seen these arguments prosper; and in his own youth he had cherished such mistakes, himself, to his own hindrance.

Had he not sung in those glorious days of hope and faith,

"Fratelli d'Italia!
L'Italia s'è desta!"

In the night which followed on the fourteenth day of the Vicar's absence, Adone, unable to either rest or to labour, went into the cattle stalls and fed and watered all the animals, then he crossed the river and went along its north bank by the same path which he had followed with Don Silverio two weeks earlier. He had passed to and fro that path often since his friend's departure, for by it the priest must return; there was no other way to and from the west.

Rain had fallen in the night and the river was buoyant, and the grass sparkled, the mountains were of sapphire blue, and above the shallows clouds of flies and gnats were fluttering, water-lilies were blossoming where the water was still, and in the marshes buffaloes pushed their dark forms amongst the nymphœa and the nuphur.

He had no longer any eyes to see these things; he only strained his sight to catch the first glimpse of a tired traveller. The landscape here was level for many miles of moor and pasture and a human form approaching could be seen from a great distance. It was such a dawn as he had used to love beyond all other blessings of nature; but now the buffaloes in the pools and swamps were not more blind to its charm than he.

The sun rose behind him out of the unseen Adrian waves, and a rosy light spread itself over

the earth; and at that moment he saw afar off a dark form moving slowly. With a loud cry he sprang forward and ran with the fleetness of a colt the hundred yards which were between him and that familiar figure.

"My son! my dear son!" cried Don Silverio, as Adone reached him and fell on his knees on the scorched turf.

"At last!" he murmured, choked with joy and fear. "Oh, where have you been? We are half dead, your people and I. What tidings do you bring? What comfort?"

"Rise up, and remember that you are a man," said Don Silverio; and the youth, gazing upwards keenly into his face, suddenly lost all hope, seeing no hope on that weary countenance.

"You cannot save us?" he cried, with a scream like a wounded hare's.

"I cannot, my dear son," answered Don Silverio.

Adone dropped backward as if a bullet had struck him; his head smote the dry ground; he had lost consciousness, his face was livid.

Don Silverio raised him and dragged him into the shade of a bay-tree and dashed water on him from the river. In a few minutes he was roused and again conscious, but on his features there was a dazed, stunned look.

"You cannot save us?" he repeated.

"Neither you nor I have millions," said Don Silverio with bitterness. "It is with no other weapon that men can fight successfully now."

Adone had risen to his feet; he was pale as a corpse, only the blood was set in his forehead.

"Is it true, then?" he muttered. "Do they mean to come here?"

"Yes."

"Who are they? Jews?"

"Jews and Gentiles. There is no difference between those races now; they have a common Credo—greed; they adore one Jehovah—gold. My boy, I am very tired, and you are ill. Let us get home as quickly as we can."

"I am not ill. It was nothing. It has passed. Tell me the worst."

"The worst, in a word, is that a foreign company, already established for several years in this country, has obtained faculty to turn this water out of its course and use it as the motive power of an electric railway and of an acetylene manufactory."

"And this cannot be undone?"

"I fear not; they are rich and powerful. What are we? Let me get home. There you shall hear all, and judge."

Adone asked and said no more. He turned and went backward. His steps were slow and unsteady, his head was hung down. The dry, hot

air was like fire around them; the sun, though still low, darted fierce rays upon them like spears thrown with a sure aim. He had not known how much and how strongly he had hoped until now that he heard that there was no hope left.

Don Silverio, though he did not speak of himself, was faint with fatigue; the return journey had tried him more cruelly than the first, since on his way to Rome he had been sustained by the hope to find the project abandoned, or at the least uncertain. He had spent all his scanty earnings, so hardly and tediously collected through a score of years, and he had brought back to his poor people and to the youth he loved, nothing except the confirmation of their worst fears. It was with difficulty that he could drag his aching feet over the burnt grass back to his parish.

When they reached the bridge they were on the village side of the stream. Adone, with an effort, raised himself from the trance into which he had fallen.

"Forgive me, sir; you are overtired, you must rest. I will come to you later."

"No, no," said Don Silverio quickly, for he thought the youth in no state to be alone. "I will wash and take a cup of coffee, then I will tell you all. Wait in my book-room."

They went together to his house. There was no one in the street or on the walls except some

children gathering dandelion leaves in the ditch. They reached the priest's house unobserved; only the little dog, who was making his diurnal search there, rushed out of the entrance in a frenzy of rapture.

"Poor little man! Dear Signorino!" murmured Don Silverio, and he took the little creature in his arms. Then he opened the door of his study. "Wait there," he said to Adone. "I will soon come downstairs. I will only wash off the dust of this journey."

Adone obeyed.

The room was dusky, cool, silent; he sat down in it and waited; he could hear the loud, uneven beating of his own heart in the stillness.

As he felt now, so he thought must feel men who have heard their own death-sentence, and are thrust alone into a cell.

If Don Silverio could do nothing, to whom could he turn?

Could he induce the people to rise? It would be their ruin as well as his, this rape of the river. Would they bear it as they bore taxation, neglect, conscription, hunger?

It was not half an hour, although it seemed to him half a day, which passed before Don Silverio came down the stone stair, his little dog running and leaping about him. He seated himself before Adone, by the shuttered window through which,

by chinks and holes in the wood, there came rays of light and tendrils of vine.

Then detail by detail, with lucidity and brevity, he narrated all he had heard and done in Rome, and which it was exceeding hard to bring home to the comprehension of a mind wholly ignorant of such things.

"When I reached Rome," he explained, "I was for some days in despair. The deputy of San Beda was not at the Chamber. He was in Sicily. Another deputy, a friend of the Prior at San Beda, to whom I had a letter, was very ill with typhoid fever. I knew not where to turn. I could not knock at the doors of strangers without credentials. Then I remembered that one with whom I had been friends, great friends, when we were both seminarists, had become a great man at the Vaticano. It was scarcely possible that he, in his great elevation, would recollect one unseen for a quarter of a century. But I took courage and sent in my name. Imagine my surprise and emotion when I was admitted at once to his presence, and was received by him with the uttermost kindness. He assisted me in every way. He could not of course move ostensibly in a matter of the government, himself, but he gave me letters to those who could obtain me the information and the interviews which I desired. He was goodness itself, and through him I was even received

by his Holiness. But from all those political and financial people whom I saw I learned but the same thing. The matter is far advanced, is beyond any alteration. The company is formed. The concurrence of parliament is not to be, but has long been, given. The ministry favours the project. They all repeated to me the same formula: public works are to the public interest. They babbled commonplaces. They spoke of great advantages to the province. I pleaded as forcibly as I could in the interests of this valley, and I opposed fact to formula. But my facts were not those which they wanted; and they told me, politely but unmistakably, that a churchman should not seek to interfere with civil matters. The promoters are masters of the position. They are all of accord: the foreign bankers, the Italian bankers; the foreign engineers, the Italian engineers; the Technical office, the President of Council, the dicastro of Hygiene, of Agriculture, of Public Works, all of them. Our poor little valley seems to them a desirable prey; they have seized it, they will keep it. They were all courteous enough. They are polite and even unwilling to cause what they call unnecessary friction, But they will not give an inch. Their talons are in our flesh as an eagle's in a lamb's. One thinks fondly that what a man possesses is his own, be it land, house, stream—what not! But we mistake.

There is a thing stronger, higher, more powerful than any poor title of property acquired by heritage, by purchase, or by labour. It is what they call expropriation. You think the Edera cannot be touched: it can be expropriated. You think the Terra Vergine cannot be touched: it can be expropriated. Against expropriation no rights can stand. It is the concentration and crystallisation of theft legitimatised by Government—that is by Force. A vagrant may not take a sheaf of your wheat, a fowl from your hen-house: if he do so, the law protects you and punishes him. A syndicate of rich men, of powerful men, may take the whole of your land, and the State will compel you to accept any arbitrary price which it may choose to put upon your loss. According as you are rich or poor yourself, so great or so small will be the amount awarded to you. All the sub-prefects, all the syndics, all the officials in this province, will be richly rewarded; the people defrauded of the soil will get what may be given them by an enforced valuation. I have conversed with all kinds and conditions of men; and I have heard only one statement in the mouths of all; the matter is beyond all alteration. There is money in it; the men whose trade is money will not let it go. My son, my dearest son, be calm, be prudent. Violence can only injure yourself, and it can save nothing."

He had for the moment spoken as he had been speaking for the last two weeks to men of education and of the world.

He was recalled to the fact that his present auditor did not reason, did not comprehend, only felt, and was drunk with his own force of feeling. The look on Adone's face appalled him.

The youth seemed almost to have no intelligence left, almost as if all which had been said to him had reached neither his ear nor his brain.

Don Silverio had been in the world of men, and unconsciously he had adopted their phraseology and their manner. To Adone, who had expected some miracle, some rescue almost archangelic, some promise of immediate and divine interposition, these calm and rational statements conveyed scarcely any sense, so terrible was the destruction of his hopes. All the trust and candour and sweetness of his nature turned to gall.

He listened, a sullen, savage darkness stealing over his countenance.

"And our rights? Theirs?—mine?" he said as Don Silverio paused.

"For all rights taken away they will give legal compensation."

"You dare repeat that, sir?"

Don Silverio controlled his indignation with difficulty.

"I dare do whatever I deem right to do. You should know that by this time."

"You think this right?"

"I think it right to repeat exactly what has been said to me. I do not of necessity approve because I repeat."

"You know no compensation is possible!"

"Morally, none. I speak of but what law allows."

"The law of pirates, of cut-throats!"

"The law of the State, alas!"

Adone laughed. His hearer had heard such laughter as that in madhouses.

"The State kills a soldier, and gives his family a hundred francs! That is the compensation of the State. If they emptied their treasuries, could they give the soldier back his life? If they emptied their treasuries, could they give us back what they will take from us?"

"My dear son, do not doubt my sympathy. All my heart is with you. But what can be done? Can a poor village, a poor commune, struggle with any chance of success against a rich company and a government? Can a stalk of wheat resist the sickle? Can an ear of wheat resist the threshing-flail? I have told you the story of Don Quixote della Mancha. Would you fight the empty air like him?"

Adone did not reply.

His beautiful face grew moody, dark, fierce; in his eyes flamed passions which had no voice upon his lips; his white teeth ground against one another.

"Believe me, Adone," said his friend, "we are in evil days when men babble of liberty, and are so intent on the mere empty sound of their lips that they perceive not the fetters on their wrists and feet. There was never any time when there was so little freedom and so little justice as in ours. Two gigantic dominions now rule the human race; they are the armies and the money-makers. Science serves them turn by turn, and receives from each its wage. The historian Mommsen has written that we are probably inferior both in intelligence and in humanity, in prosperity and in civilization, at the close of this century to what the human race was under Severus Antoninus; and it is true."

Adone did not seem to hear. What were these abstract reasonings to him? All he cared for were his river and his fields.

"I sought for an old friend of mine in Rome," said Don Silverio, endeavouring to gain his attention and divert his thoughts, "one Pamfilio Scoria. He was a learned scholar; he had possessed a small competence and a house of his own, small too, but of admirable architecture, a Quattro-centisto house. I could not find this house in Rome. After

long search I learned that it had been pulled down to make a new street. Pamfilio Scoria had in vain tried to preserve his rights. The city had turned him out and taken his property, paying what it chose. His grief was so great to see it destroyed, and to be turned adrift with his book and manuscripts, that he fell ill and died not long afterwards. On the site of the house there is a drinking-place kept by Germans; a street railway runs before it. This kind of theft, of pillage, takes place every week. It is masked as public utility. We are not alone sufferers from such a crime."

Adone was still silent.

His thoughts were not such as he could utter aloud in the priest's presence; and he heard nothing that was said; he heard only little Nerina's voice saying: "Could we not kill these men?" That flutelike whisper seemed to him to sigh with the very voice of the river itself.

Don Silverio rose, his patience, great as it was, exhausted.

"My son, as you do not give ear to me, it is useless for me to speak. I must go to my office. The Prior from San Beda desires to return this evening. I have done all I can. I have told you the facts as they stand. Take courage. Be peaceable for your mother's sake and restrain yourself for your own. It is a frightful calamity which

hangs over us all. But it is our duty to meet it like men."

"Like men!" muttered Adone as he rose to his feet; had not the child from the Abruzzi rocks a better sense of man's duty than this priest so calm and wise?

"Men resist," he said very low.

"Men resist," repeated Don Silverio. "They resist when their resistance serves any purpose, but when it can only serve to crush them uselessly under a mass of iron they are not men if they resist, but madmen."

"Farewell, sir," said Adone.

And with an obeisance he went out of the chamber.

"Poor boy! Poor, passionate, dear youth!" thought Don Silverio as the door closed. "He thinks me cold and without emotion; how little he knows! He cannot suffer as I suffer for him and for my poor wretched people. What will they do when they shall know? They will mourn like starved sheep bleating in a field of stones, and I, their shepherd, shall not have a blade of grass wherewith to comfort them!"

XI

ADONE'S sight was troubled as soon as he passed out of the dusky room into the blaze of noonday sunshine. His eyes seemed filled with blood. His brain was dizzy. That which had been his sheet-anchor in all doubts and contrition, his faith in and his reverence for Don Silverio availed him nothing now. A blind sympathy with his most violent instincts was the only thing which could now content or console him.

He was in that state to which all counsels of moderation appear but so much treason and unkindness. As he went out of the priest's house in that dazzling light, a hand caught his sleeve and that young flutelike voice of which he had thought murmured to him —

"Adone! what tidings? What has he told you?"

Nerina, having run across the bridge and up the street after the little dog, had seen him and Don Silverio enter, and had waited for Adone to come out of the house. Adone pushed her away.

"Let me be!" he said impatiently. "It is all bad—bad—bad. Bad as ill-blood. Bad as crime."

She clung to his arm nevertheless.

"Come into the church and tell me. No one cares as I do."

"Poor little soul!"

He let her draw him into the great porch of the church and thence into the church itself; it was dark as it always was, cold as an autumn evening, damp even in the canicular heat.

"No one will hear; tell me!" said the child.

He told her.

"And what are you to do?" she asked, her eyes dilated with horror.

"According to him," said Adone bitterly, "I am to be meek and helpless as the heifer which goes to the slaughter. Men must not resist what the law permits."

Nerina was mute. To dispute what Don Silverio said was like blasphemy to her, she honoured him with all her soul, but she loved Adone.

She loved the Edera water too; that fair green rippling water on whose bank she had sat naked under the dock leaves the day the two rams had fought. That which was threatened was an unholy, wicked, cruel robbery. Was it indeed necessary to yield to it in submission?

She remembered a saying of Baruffo's: "If a man stand up to me I leave him some coins in his pocket, some life in his body; but if he crouch

and cringe I stick him in the throat. He is a craven."

The doctrine of Baruffo seemed to her the more sound. It warmed the blood of the little Abruzzi-born maiden to recall it. In the high mountains and forests the meeker virtues are not greatly honoured.

She stood by Adone's side, knitting her brows under her auburn curling locks, clinching her hands.

"Is there *one* who does this evil most of all?" she said at length. "*One* we could reach?"

"You are a brave child, Nerina!" said Adone, and his words made her proud. "I fear there is a crowd. Such men are like locusts; they come in swarms. But the first man who touches the water——"

"Shall sup of it and drown."

The little girl added the words with a fierce joy in her great bright eyes.

"Hush!" said Adone, "and get you homeward, and tell my mother that Don Silverio has returned, and that I will come back to my work in a little while. Tell her he says there is no hope."

Nerina obeyed him instantly, her bare feet flying over the stones of the street. He was left alone in the sombre church with the great winged angels of stone above his head.

He was grateful for its gloom. He shrank from the light of the morning. Every drop of blood in his body, and in his brain, and in his limbs, seemed to him to turn to fire—a fire which all the waters of the Edera would never quench.

How could they be accused of rebellion or wrong-doing because they wanted to keep the water running in the channel which it had made for itself in the very beginning of the world?

The Edera was ancient as its neighbours, the Fiumicino which heard the voice of Cæsar; or the Marechia which was bridged by Augustus; ancient as the fountain of Arethusa, as the lake of Diana Nemorensis. What sacrilege could be more heinous than to chase it from its chosen course? No Lucumon of Etruria or Esarch of Ravenna or Pope of Rome had ever dared to touch it. The revolutionists! they, who only sought to preserve it? The revolutionists were those who with alien hands and vampire's greed would seek to disturb its peace.

XII

ALL that day the people of Ruscino crowded round the Presbytery.

"What of the Edera water, sir?" they asked him a hundred times in the shrill cries of the women, in the rude bellow of the men, in the high-pitched, dissonant clamour of angry speakers. And all the day his patience and kindness were abused and his nerves racked and strained in the effort to persuade them that the river which ran beneath their walls was no more theirs than the stars which shone above it.

It was hopeless to bring home to their intelligence either the invalidity of their claim, or the peril which would lie in their opposition.

"'Twas there in the beginning of time," they said, "There it must be for our children's children."

He talked nonsense, they thought; who should be able to stop a river which was for ever running? The Edera water was carried in the womb of the Leonessa; Leonessa gave it fresh birth every day.

Yes! thought Don Silverio as he walked by the

river after sunset and watched its bright, impetuous current dash under the stones and shingle whilst two kingfishers flashed along its surface. Yes, truly Nature would pour it forth every day from her unfailing breast so long as man did not do it outrage. But how long would that be? A year, two years, three years, at most; then its place would know it no more, and its song would be silent. The water-pipet would make its nest no more in its sedges, and the blue porphyrion would woo his mate no more on its bosom. As one of the rich men in Rome had said to him with a cynical smile, "The river will be there always, only it will be dry!"

In the gloaming he went and spoke to Adone's mother. She was at her spinning-wheel, but her hands moved mechanically; her face was dark and her eyelids swollen.

"My friend," he said, as he sat down on the bench beneath the rose-tree, "I have brought you ill-tidings."

"It is true then, sir?"

"Alas!"

"I do not believe it. God will not let it be."

"Would that I could think so."

"'Tis you, sir, who should think so, and not I."

"Madame Clelia," he said, with some impatience, "it is no use to dream dreams. Try and

persuade your son to accept the inevitable. My words seem harsh. They are not so. But I dare not let you cherish your illusions like this; blind yourself to fact, you expect some supernatural intercession. They will take your river; they will take your lands. Your house will be yours no more. If you do not go peaceably they will have you turned out, as if you were a debtor. This may take some time for it will be done with all due legal forms, but it will be done. They will pay you and your son some value by appraisement, but they will take your land and your house and all that is yours and his; I have seen the plans in Rome. Can you think that I should invent this to torture you? There will be a process, a sentence, an award; the money the law allots to you will be strictly paid to you; but you will be driven away from the Terra Vergine. Realise this. Try and keep your reason and save your son from madness. Surely, where there is great love between two people, and bonds of memory and mutual duty, and strong faith, there a home may be made anywhere, even over seas?"

Clelia Alba snapped with violence the thread she span. "They have talked you over, sir," she said curtly. "When you went away you were with us."

"With you!" he echoed. "In heart, in pity,

in sympathy, yes; never could I be otherwise. But were I to see you struck with lightning, should I save you by telling you that lightning did not kill? I did not know that the enterprise was as mature as I found it to be when I saw the promoters of it in Rome. But I know now that it has been long in incubation; you must remember that every bend and runlet of the water are marked on the ordnance maps; every stream, however small, is known to the technical office, and the engineers civil and military. I abhor the project. It is to me a desecration, an infamy, a robbery; it will ruin the Vald'edera from every point of view; but we can do nothing; this is what I implore you to realise. We are as helpless as one of your fowls when you cut its throat. Violence can only hurry your son into the grip of the law. His rights are morally as plain as yonder snow on those mountains; but, because they will buy his rights at what will be publicly estimated at a fair price, the law will not allow him to consider himself injured. My dear friend, you are a woman of sense and foresight; try to see this thing as it is."

"I will hear what Adone says, sir," replied Clelia Alba doggedly. "If he bids me burn the house, I shall burn it."

Don Silverio was heart-sick and impatient. What use was it to argue with such minds as

these? As well might he waste his words on the trunks of the olives, on the oxen in their stalls.

They were wronged.

That the wrong done them was masked under specious pretences and was protected by all the plate armour of law and government, made the outrage little the worse to them. The brigand from the hills who used to harry their cattle and pillage their strong-box looked to them a hero, a saint, a Christ, compared to these modern thieves who were environed with all the defences and impunity which the law and the State could give. When an earth-shock makes the soil under your feet quiver, and gape, and mutter, you feel that unnatural forces are being hurled against you, you feel that you are the mere sport and jest of an unjust deity. This was what they felt now.

"Nay," said Clelia Alba, "if the earth opened, and took us, it would be kinder; it would bury us at least under our own rooftree."

What use was it to speak to such people as these of the right of expropriation granted by parliament, of the authority of a *dicastero*, and of a prefecture, of the sophistries and arguments of lawyers, of the adjudication of values, of the appraisement of claims? They were wronged: and they came of a race and of a soil in which the only fitting redresser of wrong was revenge.

"Mother," cried Adone, "my father would

not have given up his land as meekly as a sheep yields up her life."

"No," said Clelia Alba; "whether he came from those war-lords of old I know not, but he would have fought as they fought."

XIII

THE autumn and winter passed without more being heard in the Vald'edera of the new invasion. The peasantry generally believed that such silence was favourable to their wishes; but Don Silverio knew that it was otherwise. The promoters of the work did not concern themselves with the local population, they dealt with greater folks; with those who administered the various communes, and who controlled the valuation of the land through which the course of the Edera ran; chiefly those well-born persons who constituted the provincial council. A great deal of money would change hands, but it was intended, by all through whose fingers those heavy sums would pass, that as little of the money as possible should find its way to the owners of the soil. A public work is like a fat hog; between the slaughterers, the salesmen, the middlemen, and the consumers, little falls to the original holder of the hog. The peasants of the Vald'edera were astonished that none came to treat with them; but they did not understand that they dwelt under a paternal government, and the first care of a paternal govern-

ment is to do everything for its children which is likely to promise any profit itself.

The men of business whom Don Silverio had seen in Rome did not trouble themselves with the rustic proprietors of either water or land; they treated with the great officials of the department, with the deputies, the prefects, and sub-prefects, the syndics and assessors; so a perfect silence on the question reigned from the rise of the river to its mouth, and many of the men said over their wood-fires that they had been scared for nothing. The younger men, however, and those who were under Adone's influence, were more wary; they guessed that the matter was being matured without them; that when the hog should be bacon, should be cut up and cured, and eaten, the smallest and rustiest flitch would then be divided amongst them. Agents, such agents as were ministerial instruments of these magnates in election time, went amongst the scattered people and spoke to them of the great public utility of the contemplated works, and made them dispirited and doubtful of the value of their holdings, and uncertain of the legality of their tenures. But these agents were cautious and chary of promises, for they knew that in this district the temper of men was proud and hot and revengeful; and they knew also that when these rural owners should be brought into the courts to receive their price,

they would be dealt with just as the great men chose. One by one, so that each should be unsupported by his neighbours, the men of the valley were summoned, now to this town, now to the other, and were deftly argued with, and told that what was projected would be their salvation, and assured that the delegates who would be sent in their name by their provincial council to the capital would defend all their dearest interests.

The rich man, the man of business, the man of cities may receive in such transactions compensation, which is greatly to their advantage, because traffic is their trade, because to buy and sell, and turn and re-turn, and roll the ball of gold so that it grows bigger every hour, is their custom and interest. But the poor man, the rustic, the man with the one ewe lamb, loses always, whether he assents to the sale or has it forced upon him. These people of the valley might have a little ready money given them on valuation, but it would be money clipped and cropped by the avarice of intermediaries until little of it would remain and they would be driven out to begin life anew; away from their old rooftree and the fruits of long years of labour.

From far and near men came to Ruscino to take counsel of its vicar; his wisdom being esteemed and his intelligence known in the valley beyond the confines of his parish; and what advice could

he give them? He could but tell them that it was useless to kick against the pricks. He knew so well the cold, curt, inflexible official answer; the empty, vapouring regrets, false, simpering, pharisaical; the parrot-phrases of public interests, public considerations, public welfare; the smile, the sneer, the self-complacent shrug of those whose bribe is safely pocketed and who know that only the people whom they profess to serve will suffer. To him as to them it seemed a monstrous thing to take away the water from its natural channel and force the men who lived on it and by it to alter all their ways of life and see their birthplace changed into a desert in order that aliens might make money. But he could not counsel them to resist; no resistance was possible. It was like any other tyranny of the State; like the fiscal brutality which sold up a poor man's hayrick or clothing because he could not pay the poll-tax. If the poor man resisted, if he fired his old fowling-piece, or used his knife on the minions of the State, what use was such resistance? He went to rot in prison.

His calling, his conscience, his good sense, his obedience to law, all alike compelled him to urge on them patience, submission, and inaction before the provocation of a great wrong. He dared not even let them see one tithe of the sympathy he

felt, lest if he did so they should draw from it an incentive to illegal action.

The part which he was obliged to take in thus persuading the people to be tranquil under injustice estranged him farther and farther from Adone Alba, who found it a cowardice and a treachery, although he dared not say so in words. Had he retained the coolness of reason the youth would have known and acknowledged that in the position of Don Silverio no other course would have been possible or decent. But reason had long left him, and inaction and impulse alone remained. He would not allow that a wrong might be condemned, and yet endured. To him all endurance had in it the manners of condonation.

He ceased to have any faith in his friend and teacher; and gradually grew more and more alienated from him; their intimate affection, their frequent intercourse, their long walks and evening meetings were over; and even as his spiritual director the vicar had no longer power over him. Most of his actions and intentions were concealed; except in the younger men of the district who saw as he saw he had now no confidence in any one. The impending loss of the land and the water turned all the sweetness of his nature to gall. He thought that never in the history of the world had any wrong so black been done. He, himself,

flung broadcast the fires of burning incitation without heeding or caring whither the flames might reach. Riots had been successful before this; why not now? He was young enough and innocent enough to believe in the divine right of a just cause. If that were denied, what remained to the weak?

If he could, he would have set the valley in flames from one end to the other rather than have allowed the foreigners to seize it. Had not his forefathers perished in fire on yonder hill rather than cede to the Borgia?

Evening after evening he looked at the sun setting behind the Rocca and felt the black rage in him gnaw at his heart like a vulture.

They would offer him money for this dear earth, for this fair, beloved stream!—the mere thought choked him as a man who loved his wife would be choked at the thought of her dishonoured sale.

Some were half persuaded that it would be a fine thing to get some crisp banknotes in exchange for waste ground which yielded little, or a cabin which was falling to pieces, or a strip of woodland which gave them fuel, but not much more. But the majority were angry, irreconcilable, furious to lose the water, full of their wrongs. These were glad to find in Adone Alba a spokesman and a leader; they were tow which caught fire at his

torch. They comprehended little, but they knew that they were wronged; and they agreed with him that the labourers who should come from over the border to meddle with them should be made to rue it bitterly.

The Italian goes over seas, indeed; huddled under the hatches of emigrant ships; miserable, starved, confined; unable to move, scarce able to breathe, like the unhappy beasts carried with him. But he never goes willingly; he never wrenches himself from the soil without torn nerves and aching heart; if he live and make a little money in exile he comes back to the valley of the village church, to the sound of the bell, which he knew in his boyhood, to walk the lanes where he threw his wooden quoit as a lad, and to play dominoes under the green bough of the winehouse where as a child he used to watch his elders and envy them.

Most of these people dwelling on the Edera water had not been five miles away from the river in all their lives. The moorland birds and beasts were farther afield than they. They had no interest in what was beyond their own freehold; they did not even know or care whither the water went, or whence it came. Where it was, they owned it. That was enough for them.

"Sir, what is it Adone does?" said Clelia Alba, one dusky and stormy eve after vespers. "At

nightfall out he goes; and never a word to me, only 'Your blessing, mother,' he says, as if he might lose his life where he goes. I thought at first it was some love matter, for he is young; but it cannot be that, for he is too serious, and he goes fully armed, with his father's pistols in his belt and his own long dagger in his stocking. True, they go so to a love tryst, if it be a dangerous one; if the woman be wedded; only I think it is not that, for men in love are different. I think that he broods over some act."

"Neither you nor I can do aught. He is of age to judge for himself," said Don Silverio; "but, like you, I do not think a woman is the cause of his absence."

"Can you not speak to him, sir?"

"I have spoken. It is useless. He is moved by a motive stronger than any argument we can use. In a word, good Clelia, this coming seizure of the water is suffering so great to him that he loses his reason. He is trying to make the men of the commune see as he sees. He wants to rouse them to arm them. He might as well set the calves in your stalls to butt the mountain granite."

"Maybe, sir," said Clelia Alba, unwillingly; but her eyes gleamed, and her stern, proud face grew harder. "But he has the right to do it if he can. If they touch the water they are thieves,

worse than those who came down from the hills in the years of my girlhood."

"You would encourage him in insurrection, then?"

"Nay, I would not do that; but neither would I blame him. Every man has a right to defend his own. Neither his father nor mine, sir, were cowards."

"This is no question of cowardice. It is a question of common sense. A few country lads cannot oppose a government. With what weapons can they do so? Courage I honour; without it all active virtues are supine; but it is not courage to attempt the impossible, to lead the ignorant to death—or worse."

"Of that my son must judge, sir," said Adone's mother, inflexible to argument. "I shall not set myself against him. He is master now. If he bids me fire the place I shall do it. For four-and-twenty years he has obeyed me like a little child; never a murmur, never a frown. Now he is his own master, and master of the land. I shall do as he tells me. It is his turn now, and he is no fool, sir, Adone."

"He is no fool; no. But he is beside himself. He is incapable of judgment. His blood is on fire and fires his brain."

"I think not, sir. He is quiet. He speaks little——"

"Because he meditates what will not bear speech. Were he violent I should be less alarmed. He shuns me—me—his oldest friend."

"Because no doubt, sir, he feels you are against him."

"Against him! How can I, being what I am, be otherwise? Could you expect me to foment insurrection, and what less than that can opposition such as he intends become?"

"You speak as you feel bound to speak, sir, no doubt."

"But think of the end? Must not every action be weighed and considered and judgment passed on it by what will be its issue? No rising of our poor people can effect anything except their own destruction. It is only a demagogue who would urge them on to it. Adone is not a demagogue. He is a generous youth frantic from sorrow, but helpless. Can you not see that?"

"I do not see that he is helpless," said his mother with obstinacy. "The thing they are about to do us is unjust. I would load a gun myself against them, and if money be what is wanted I would give Adone my pearls. He asks me for nothing, but when he does I will strip myself to my shift to aid him."

"It is a terrible madness!" cried Don Silverio. "What can your fowling-piece or your necklace do against all the force these speculators and con-

tractors will employ? It is a great, a heinous, wrong which will be done to you; that no one can feel more strongly than I. But there are wrongs to which we must submit when we are weak; and, my good Clelia, against this we poor folks in the Vale of Edera are as weak as the teal in the marshes against the swivel guns of the sportsmen's punts."

But he argued in vain; logic and persuasion are alike useless when opposed to the rock of ignorance and obstinacy. She held him in deep reverence; she brought her conscience to his judgment; she thought him beyond ordinary humanity; but when he endeavoured to persuade her that her son was wrong he failed.

"Sir, you know that this crime against the river will ruin us," she said doggedly. "Why then should you try to tie our hands? I do not know what Adone does; his mind is hid from me, but if, as you say, he wants a rising of our people, it is natural and just."

When the mind of the peasant — man or woman—be made up in its stubbornness, all learning, wisdom, experience, even fact speaks in vain; it opposes to all proofs the passive resistance of a dogged incredulity; to reason with it is as useless as to quarry stone with a razor.

Many and many a time had he given up in exhaustion, and nausea his endeavours to convince

the rural mind of some simple fact, some clear cause, some elementary principle. He knew that Clelia Alba would never believe in the exile which would be her certain fate until the armed and liveried creatures of the State should drive her from her home by order of the State. He had seen in Rome that there was no possible chance of opposing this enterprise against the Edera water. It had been decided on by men of money who had the ear of ministers, the precedence in ante-chambers, the means of success in political departments and in commercial centres. A few scattered provincial owners of land and labourers on land might as well try to oppose these men as the meek steinbok in the mountain solitudes to escape the expanding bullet of a prince's rifle. Yet he also saw how impossible it was to expect a young man like Adone, with his lineage, his temperament, his courage, and his mingling of ignorance and knowledge, to accept the inevitable without combat. As well might he be bidden to accept dishonour.

The remorse in his soul was keen, inasmuch as without him Adone would never have known of his descent from the lords of Ruscino, and never, probably, have acquired that "little" learning which a poet of the north has said is a dangerous thing.

"Better," thought Don Silverio, with torment-

ing self-reproach, "better have left him to his plough, to his scythe, to his reaping-hook; better have left him in ignorance of the meaning of art and of study; better have left him a mere peasant to beget peasants like himself. Then he would have suffered less, and might possibly have taken peaceably such compensation as the law would have allowed him for the loss to his land, and have gone away to the West, as so many go, leaving the soil they were born on to pass out of culture."

Would Adone ever have done that? No; he would not; he was wedded to the soil like the heaths that grew out of it. He might be violently dragged away, but he would never live elsewhere; his heart had struck its roots too deeply into the earth which nurtured him.

"Why did you tell him of all the great men that lived?" Clelia Alba had often said to him. "Why did you fill his soul with that hunger which no bread that is baked can content? We, who work to live, have no time to do aught except work, and sleep awhile to get strength for more work; and so on, always the same, until age ties knots in our sinews, and makes our blood thin and slow. What use is it to open gates to him which he must never pass, to make his mind a tangled skein that can never be undone? When you work hard you want to rest in your resting

hours, not to dream. Dreaming is no rest. He is always dreaming, and now he dreams of blood and fire."

His heart was with them, and by all the obligations of his calling was forced to be against them. He was of a militant temper; he would gladly have led them into action as did the martial priests of old; but his sense, his duty, his conscience, all forbade him to even show them such encouragement as would lie in sympathy. Had he been rich he would have taken their cause into the tribunals and contested this measure inch by inch, however hopelessly. But who would plead for a poor parish, for a penniless priest? What payment could he offer, he who could scarcely find the coins to fill his salt-box or to mend his surplice?

A great anxiety consumed him. He saw no way out of this calamity. The people were wronged, grossly wronged, but how could they right that wrong? Bloodshed would not alter it, or even cure it. What was theirs, and the earth's, was to be taken from them; and how were they to be persuaded that to defend their own would be a crime?

"There is nothing, then, but for the people to lie down and let the artillery roll over them!" said Adone once, with bitter emphasis.

"And the drivers and the gunners are their

own brothers, sons, nephews, who will not check their gallop an instant for that fact; for the worst thing about force is that it makes its human instruments mere machines like the guns which they manœuvre," thought Don Silverio, as he answered aloud: "No; I fear there will be nothing else for them to do under any tyranny, until all the nations of the earth shall cease to send their children to be made the janissaries of the State. No alteration of existing dominions will be possible so long as the Armies exist."

Adone was silent; convinced against his will, and therefore convinced without effect or adhesion.

He dared not tell his friend of the passionate propaganda which he had begun up and down the course of the Edera, striving to make these stocks and stones stir, striving to make the blind see, the deaf hear, the infirm rise and leap.

"Let us go and make music," said the priest at last. "That will not harm any one, and will do our own souls good. It is long since I heard your voice."

"It will be longer," thought Adone, as he answered: "Excuse me, sir; I cannot think of any other thing than this great evil which hangs over us. There is not one of our country people who does not curse the scheme. They are frightened and stupid, but they are angry and miserable.

Those who are their spokesmen, or who ought to be, do not say what they wish, do not care what they wish, do not ask what they wish. They are the sons of the soil, but they count for nothing. If they met to try and do anything for themselves, guards—soldiery—would come from a distance, they say, and break up the meetings, and carry those who should speak away to some prison. The Government approves the theft of the water; that is to be enough."

"Yet public meeting has been a right of the people on the Latin soil ever since the Cæsars."

"What matter right, what matter wrong? No one heeds either."

"What can be done then?"

"We must help ourselves."

He spoke sullenly and under his breath. He did not dare to say more clearly what was in his thoughts.

"By brute force?" said Don Silverio. "That were madness. What would be the number of the able-bodied men of all three communes? Let us say two thousand; that is over the mark. What weapons would they have? Old muskets, old fowling-pieces, and not many of those; their scythes, their axes, their sticks. A single battalion would cut them down as you mow grass. You have not seen rioters dispersed by trained troops. I have. I have seen even twenty cara-

bineers gallop down a street full of armed citizens, the carabineers shooting right and left without selection; and the street, before they had ridden two hundred yards, was empty except for a few fallen bodies which the horses trampled. You can never hope to succeed in these days with a mere *jacquerie*. You might as well set your wheat-sheaves up to oppose a field battery."

"Garibaldi," muttered Adone, "he had naught but raw levies!"

"Garibaldi was an instinctive military genius, like Aguto, like Ferruccio, like Gian delle Bande Neri, like all the great Condottieri. But he would probably have rotted in the Spielberg, or been shot in some fortress of the Quadrilateral, if he had not been supported by that proclamation of Genoa and campaign of Lombardy, which were Louis Napoleon's supreme error in French policy."

Adone was silent, stung by that sense of discomfiture and mortification which comes upon those who feel their own inability to carry on an argument. To him Garibaldi was superhuman, fabulous, far away in the mists of an heroic past, as Ulysses to Greek youths.

"You, sir, may preach patience," he said sullenly. "It is no doubt your duty to preach it. But I cannot be patient. My heart would choke in my throat."

Don Silverio looked him straight in the face.

"What is it you intend to do?"

"I shall do what I may, what I can."

"I tell you that you can do nothing, my son."

"How know you that, reverend? You are a priest, not a man."

A faint red colour came over Don Silverio's colourless face.

"One may be both," he said simply. "You are distraught, my son, by a great calamity. Try and see yourself as others see you, and do not lead the poor and ignorant into peril. Will the Edera waters be freer because your neighbours and you are at the galleys? The men of gold who have the men of steel behind them will be always stronger than you."

"God is over us all," said Adone.

Don Silverio was silent. He could not refute that expression of faith, but in his soul he could not share it; and Adone had said it, less in faith, than in obstinacy. He meant to rouse the country if he could, let come what might of the rising.

Who could tell the issue? A spark from a poor man's hearth had set a city in flames before now.

"How can you think me indifferent?" said Don Silverio. "Had I no feeling for you should I not feel for myself? Almost certainly my life will be doomed to end here. Think you that I

shall see with callousness the ruin of this fair landscape, which has been my chief consolation through so many dreary years? You, who deem yourself so wholly without hope, may find solace if you choose to take it. You are young, you are free, all the tenderest ties of life can be yours if you choose; if this home be destroyed you may make another where you will. But I am bound here. I must obey; I must submit. I cannot move; I cannot alter or renew my fate; and to me the destruction of the beauty of the Edera valley will be the loss of the only pleasure of my existence. Try and see with my eyes, Adone; it may help you to bear your burden."

But he might as well have spoken to the water itself, or to the boulders of its rocks, or to the winds which swept its surface.

"It is not yours," said Adone, almost brutally. "You were not born here. You cannot know! Live elsewhere? My mother and I? Sooner a thousand times would we drown in Edera!"

The water was golden under the reflections of the sun as he spoke; the great net was swaying in it, clear of the sword rush and iris; a kingfisher like a jewel was threading its shallows, blue as the veronica; there was the fresh smell of the heather and the wild roses on the air. "You do not know what it is to love a thing!—how should you?—you, a priest!" said Adone.

Don Silverio did not reply. He went on down the course of the stream.

One morning in early April Adone received a private invitation to attend in five days' time at the Muncipality of San Beda to hear of something which concerned him. It was brought by the little old postman who went the rounds of the district once a week on his donkey; the five days had already expired before the summons was delivered. Adone's ruddy cheeks grew pale as he glanced over it; he thrust it into the soil and drove his spade through it. The old man, waiting in hopes to get a draught of wine, looked at him in dismay.

"Is that a way to treat their Honours' commands?" he said aghast.

Adone did not answer or raise his head; he went on with his digging; he was turning and trenching the soil to plant potatoes; he flung spadefuls of earth over the buried summons.

"What's amiss with you, lad?" said the old fellow, who had known him from his infancy.

"Leave me," said Adone, with impatience. "Go to the house if you want to drink, and to bait your beast."

"Thank ye," said the old man. "But you will go, won't you, Adone? It fares ill with those who do not go."

"Who told you to say that?"

"Nobody; but I have lived a many years, and I have carried those printed papers a many years, and I know that those who do not go when they are called rue it. Their Honours don't let you flout them."

"Their Honours be damned!" said Adone. "Go to the house."

The little old man, sorely frightened, dropped his head, and pulling his donkey by its bridle went away along the grass path under the vines.

Adone went on delving, but his strong hands shook with rage and emotion as they grasped the handle of the spade. He knew as well as if he had been told by a hundred people that he was called to treat of the sale of the Terra Vergine. He forced himself to go on with his forenoon's labour, but the dear familiar earth swam and spun before his sight.

"What?" he muttered to it, "I who love you am not your owner? I who was born on you am not your lawful heir? I who have laboured on you ever since I was old enough to use a tool at all am now in my manhood to give you up to strangers? I will make you run red with blood first!"

It wanted then two hours of noon. When twelve strokes sounded from across the river, tolled slowly by the old bronze bell of the church

tower, he went for the noonday meal and rest to the house.

The old man was no longer there, but Clelia Alba said to him:

"Dario says they summon you to San Beda, and that you will not go?"

"He said right."

"But, my son," cried his mother, "go you must! These orders are not to be shirked. Those who give them have the law behind them. You know that."

"They have the villainy of the law behind them; the only portion of the law the people are ever suffered to see."

"But how can you know what it is about if you do not go?"

"There is only one thing which it can be. One thing that I will not hear."

"You mean for the river—for the land?"

"What else?"

Her face grew as stern as his own. "If that be so . . . Still you should go, my son; you should go to hold your own."

"I will hold my own," said Adone; and in his thoughts he added, "but not by words."

"What is the day of the month for which they call you?" asked his mother.

"The date is passed by three days. That is a little jest which authority often plays upon the people."

They went within. The meal was eaten in silence; the nut-brown eyes of Nerina looked wistfully in their faces, but she asked nothing; she guessed enough.

Adone said nothing to Don Silverio of the summons, for he knew that the priest would counsel strongly his attendance in person at San Beda, even although the date was already passed.

But Don Silverio had heard of it from the postman, who confided to him the fears he felt that Adone would neglect the summons, and so get into trouble. He saw at once the error which would be committed if any sentence should be allowed to go by default through absence of the person cited to appear. By such absence the absentee discredits himself; whatsoever may be the justice of his cause, it is prejudiced at the outset. But how to persuade of this truth a man so blind with pain and rage and so dogged in self-will as Adone had become, Don Silverio did not see. He shrank from renewing useless struggles and disputes which led to no issue. He felt that Adone and he would only drift farther and farther apart with every word they spoke.

The young man saw this thing through a red mist of hatred and headstrong fury; it was impossible for his elder to admit that such views were wise or pardonable, or due to anything more than the heated visions evoked by a great wrong.

That evening at sunset he saw the little girl

Nerina at the river. She had led two cows to the water, and they and she were standing knee deep in the stream. The western light shone on their soft, mottled, dun hides and on her ruddy brown hair and bright young face. The bearded bulrushes were round them; the light played on the broad leaves of the docks, and the red spikes of great beds of willow-herb; the water reflected the glowing sky, and close to its surface numbers of newly-come swallows whirled and dipped and darted, chasing gnats, whilst near at hand on a spray a little woodlark sang.

The scene was fair, peaceful, full of placid and tender loveliness.

"And all this is to be changed and ruined in order that some sons of the mammon of unrighteousness may set up their mills to grind their gold," he thought to himself as he passed over the stepping-stones which at this shallow place could be crossed dryfoot.

"Where is Adone?" he called to the child.

"He is gone down the river in the punt, most Reverend."

"And his mother?"

"Is at the house, sir."

Don Silverio went through the pastures under the great olives. When he reached the path leading to the house he saw Clelia Alba seated before the doorway spinning. The rose-tree displayed

its first crimson buds above her head; under the eaves the swallows were busy.

Clelia Alba rose and dropped a low courtesy to him, then resumed her work at the wheel.

"You have heard, sir?" she said in a low tone. "They summon him to San Beda."

"Old Dario told me; but Adone will not go?"

"No, sir; he will never go."

"He is in error."

"I do not know, sir. He is best judge of that."

"I fear he is in no state of mind to judge calmly of anything. His absence will go against him. Instead of an amicable settlement the question will go to the tribunals, and if he be unrepresented there, he will be condemned *in contumacium.*"

"Amicable settlement?" repeated his mother, her fine face animated and stern, and her deep, dark eyes flashing. "Can you, sir, dare you, sir, name such a thing? What they would do is robbery, vile robbery, a thousand times worse than aught the men of night ever did when they came down from the hills to harass our homesteads."

"I do not say otherwise; but the law is with those who harass you now. We cannot alter the times, good Clelia, we must take them as they are. Your son should go to San Beda and urge his rights, not with violence but with firmness and

lucidity; he should also provide himself with an advocate, or he will be driven out of his home by sheer force, and with some miserable sum as compensation."

Clelia Alba's brown skin grew ashen grey, and its heavy lines deepened.

"You mean . . . that is possible?"

"It is more than possible. It is certain. These things always end so. My poor dear friend! do you not understand, even yet, that nothing can save your homestead?"

Clelia Alba leaned her elbows on her knees and bowed her face upon her hands. She felt as women of her race had felt on some fair morn when they had seen the skies redden with baleful fires, and the glitter of steel corslets shine under the foliage, and had heard the ripe corn crackle under the horses' hoofs, and had heard the shrieking children scream, "The lances are coming, mother! Mother! save us!"

Those women had had no power to save homestead or child; they had seen the pikes twist in the curling locks, and the daggers thrust in the white young throats, and the flames soar to heaven, burning rooftree and clearing stackyard, and they had possessed no power to stay the steel or quench the torch. She was like them.

She lifted her face up to the light.

"He will kill them."

"He may kill one man—two men—he will have blood on his hands. What will that serve? I have told you again and again. This thing is inevitable—frightful, but inevitable, like war. In war do not millions of innocent and helpless creatures suffer through no fault of their own, no cause of their own, on account of some king's caprice or statesman's blunder? You are just such victims here. Nothing will preserve to you the Terra Vergine. My dear old friend, have courage."

"I cannot believe it, sir; I cannot credit it. The land is ours; this little bit of the good and solid earth is ours; God will not let us be robbed of it."

"My friend! no miracles are wrought now. I have told you again and again and again you must lose this place."

"I will not believe it!"

"Alas! I pray that you may not be forced to believe; but I know that I pray in vain. Tell me, you are certain that Adone will not answer that summons?"

"I am certain."

"He is mad."

"No, sir, he is not mad. No more than I, his mother. We have faith in heaven."

Don Silverio was silent. It was not for him to tell them that such faith was a feeble staff.

"I must not tarry, he said, and rose. "The night is near at hand. Tell your son what I have said. My dear friend, I would almost as soon stab you in the throat as say these things to you; but as you value your boy's sanity and safety make him realise this fact, which you and he deny: the law will take your home from you, as it will take the river from the province."

"No, sir!" said Clelia Alba fiercely. "No, no, no! There is a God above us!"

Don Silverio bade her sadly farewell, and insisted no more. He went through the odorous grasslands where the primrose and wild hyacinth grew so thickly and the olive branches were already laden with purpling berries, and his soul was uneasy, seeing how closed is the mind of the peasant to argument or to persuasion. Often had he seen a poor beetle pushing its ball of dirt up the side of a sandhill only to fall back and begin again and again fall; for truth to endeavour to penetrate the brain of the rustic is as hard as for the beetle to climb the sand. He was disinclined to seek the discomfiture of another useless argument, but neither could he be content in his conscience to let this matter wholly alone.

Long and dreary as the journey was to San Beda, he undertook it again, saying nothing to any one of his purpose. He hoped to be able before the syndic to put Adone's contumacy in a pardonable light, and perhaps to plead his cause

better than the boy could plead it for himself. To Don Silverio he always seemed a boy still, and therefore excusable in all his violences and extravagances.

The day was fine and cool, and walking was easier and less exhausting than it had been at the season of his first visit; moreover, his journey to Rome had braced his nerves and sinews to exertion, and restored to him the energy and self-possession which the long, tedious, monotonous years of solitude in Ruscino had weakened. There was a buoyant wind coming from the sea with rain in its track, and a deep blue sky with grand clouds drifting past the ultramarine hues of the Abruzzi range. The bare brown rocks grew dark as bronze, and the forest-clothed hills were almost black in the shadows as the clustered towers and roofs of the little city came in sight. He went, fatigued as he was, straight to the old episcopal palace, which was now used as the municipality, without even shaking the dust off his feet.

"Say that I come for the affair of Adone Alba," he said to the first persons he saw in the ante-room on the first floor. In the little ecclesiastical town his calling commanded respect. They begged him to sit down and rest, and in a few minutes returned to say that the most illustrious the Count Corradini would receive him at once in his private room; it was a day of general

council, but the council would not meet for an hour. The syndic was a tall, spare, frail man with a patrician's face and an affable manner. He expressed himself in courteous terms as flattered by the visit of the Vicar of Ruscino, and inquired if in any way he could be of the slightest service.

"Of the very greatest, your Excellency," said Don Silverio. "I have ventured to come hither on behalf of a young parishioner of mine, Adone Alba, who, having received the summons of your Excellency only yesterday, may, I trust, be excused for not having obeyed it on the date named. He is unable to come to-day. May I offer myself for his substitute as *amicus curiae?*"

"Certainly, certainly," said Corradini, relieved to meet an educated man instead of the boor he had expected. "If the summons were delayed by any fault of my officials, the delay must be inquired into. Meanwhile, most reverend, have you instructions to conclude the affair?"

"As yet, I venture to remind your Excellency, we do not even know what is the affair of which you speak."

"Oh no; quite true. The matter is the sale of the land known under the title of the Terra Vergine."

"Thank Heaven I am here, and not Adone," thought Don Silverio.

Aloud he answered, "What sale? The proprietor has heard of none."

"He must have heard. It can be no news to you that the works about to be made upon the river Edera will necessitate the purchase of the land known as the Terra Vergine."

Here the syndic put on gold spectacles, drew towards him a black portfolio filled by plans and papers, and began to move them about, muttering, as he searched, little scraps of phrases out of each of them.' At last he turned over the sheets which concerned the land of the Alba.

"Terra Vergine—Commune of Ruscino—owners Alba from 1620—family of good report—regular taxpayers—sixty hectares—land productive; value—just so—humph, humph, humph!"

Then he laid down the documents and looked at Don Silverio from over his spectacles.

"I conclude, most reverend, that you come empowered by this young man to treat with us?"

"I venture, sir," replied Don Silverio respectfully, "to remind you again that it is impossible I should be so empowered, since Adone Alba was ignorant of the reason for which he was summoned here."

Corradini shuffled his documents nervously with some irritation.

"This conference, then, is mere waste of time? I hold council to-day——"

"Pardon me, your Excellency," said Don Silverio blandly. "It will not be waste of time if you will allow me to lay before you certain facts, and, first, to ask you one question: Who is, or are, the buyer or buyers of this land?"

The question was evidently unwelcome to the syndic; it was direct, which every Italian considers ill-bred, and it was awkward to answer. He was troubled for personal reasons, and the calm and searching gaze of the priest's dark eyes embarrassed him. After all, he thought, it would have been better to deal with the boor himself.

"Why do you ask that?" he said irritably. "You are aware that the National Society for the Improvement of Land and the foreign company of the Teramo-Tronto Electric Railway combine in these projected works?"

"To which of these two societies, then, is 'Adone Alba, or am I, as his *locum tenens*, to address ourselves?"

"To neither. This commune deals with you."

"Why?"

Count Corradini took off his glasses, put them on again,, shifted the papers and plans in his imposing portfolio.

"May I ask again—why?" said Don Silverio in the gentlest tones of his beautiful voice.

"Because, because," answered the syndic irritably, "because the whole affair is in treaty between our delegates and the companies. Public societies do not deal with private individuals directly, but by proxy."

"Pardon my ignorance," said Don Silverio, "but why does the commune desire to substitute itself for the owner?"

"It is usual."

"Ah! It is usual."

Corradini did not like the repetition of his phrase, which would not perhaps bear very close examination. He looked at his watch.

"Excuse me, Reverend Father, but time presses."

"Allow me to crave of your bounty a little more time, nevertheless. I am not habituated to business, but I believe, if I understand your worshipful self aright, the commune contemplates purchasing from the individuals with power and intent to sell to the companies."

What an unmannerly ecclesiastic, thought Corradini; for indeed, put thus bluntly and crudely, what the commune, as represented by himself, was doing did not look as entirely correct as could be desired.

"I was in Rome, most illustrious," said Don Silverio, "in connection with this matter some months ago."

"In Rome?"

To hear this was unpleasant to the syndic; it had never occurred to him that his rural, illiterate, and sparsely populated district would have contained any person educated enough to think of inquiring in Rome about this local matter.

"To Rome! Why did you go to Rome?"

"To acquire information concerning this scheme."

"You are an owner of land?"

"No sir. I am a poor, very poor, priest."

"It cannot concern you, then."

"It concerns my people. Nothing which concerns them is alien to me."

"Humph, humph! Most proper, most praiseworthy. But we have no time for generalities. You came to treat of the Terra Vergine?"

"Pardon me, sir; I came to hear why you summoned Adone Alba, one of my flock."

"Could he not have come himself? It had been but his duty."

"He could not, sir; and, to say truth, he would not. He does not intend to sell his land."

"What!"

Corradini half rose from his chair, leaning both hands on the table, and staring through his glasses across the mass of portfolios and papers at the priest.

"He will have no choice allowed him," he said

with great anger. "To the interests of the State all minor interests must bend. What! a mere peasant stand in the way of a great enterprise?"

"You intend expropriation then?"

The voice of Don Silverio was very calm and sweet, but his countenance was stern.

Corradini was irritated beyond measure. He did not desire to play that great card so early in the game.

"I do not say that," he muttered. "There must be parliamentary sanction for any forced sale. I spoke in general terms. Private interest must cede to public."

"There is parliamentary sanction already given to the project for the Valley of Edera," said Don Silverio, "expropriation included."

Count Corradini threw himself back in his chair with an action expressive at once of wrath and of impotence. He had an irritating sense that this priest was master of the position, and knew much more than he said. In reality Don Silverio knew very little, but he had skill and tact enough to give a contrary impression to his auditor. He followed up his advantage.

"Expropriation is to be permitted to enforce sales on recalcitrant landowners," he continued. "But that measure, even though conceded in theory, will take time to translate into practice. I fear, sir, that if it be ever put into execution we

shall have trouble in your commune. Your council has been over hasty in allying itself with these speculators. You and they have not taken into account the immense injury which will be done to the valley and to my own village or town, call it as you will, of Ruscino. The people are quiet, patient, meek, but they will not be so if they are robbed of the water of the Edera. It is the source of all the little—the very little—good which comes to them. So it is with Adone Alba. He has been God-fearing, law-abiding, a good son, excellent in all relations; but he will not recognize as law the seizure of his land. Sir, you are the elected chief of this district; all these people look to you for support in their emergency. What are these foreign speculators to you that you should side with them? You say this commune will purchase from its peasant proprietors in the interests of these foreigners. Was it to do this that they elected you? Why should the interests of the foreigners be upheld by you to the injury of those of your own people? Speaking for my own parish, I can affirm to you that, simple souls as they are, poor in the extreme, and resigned to poverty, you will have trouble with them all if you take it on you to enforce the usurpation of the Edera water."

Count Corradini, still leaning back in his large leathern chair, listened as if he were hypnotised;

he was astounded, offended, enraged, but he was fascinated by the low, rich, harmonious modulations of the voice which addressed him, and by the sense of mastery which the priest conveyed without by a single word asserting it.

"You would threaten me with public disorder?" he said feebly, and with consciousness of feebleness.

"No, sir; I would adjure you, in God's name, not to provoke it."

"It does not rest with me."

He raised himself in his chair; his slender, aristocratic hands played nervously with the strings of the portfolio, his eyelids flickered, and his eyes avoided those of his visitor.

"I have no voice in this matter. You mistake."

"Surely your Excellency speaks with the voice of all your electors?"

"Of my administrative council, then? But they are all in favour of the project; so is his Excellency the Prefect, so is the Deputy, so is the Government. Can I take upon myself in my own slender personality to oppose these?"

"Yes, sir, because you are the mouthpiece of those who cannot speak for themselves."

"Euh! Euh! That may be true in a sense. But you mistake; my authority is most limited. I have but two votes in Council. I am as wholly

convinced as you can be that some will suffer for the general good. The individual is crushed by the crowd in these days. We are in a period of immense and febrile development; of wholly unforeseen expansion; we are surrounded by miracles of science; we are witnesses of an increase of intelligence which will lead to results whereof no living man can dream; civilisation in its vast and ineffable benevolence sometimes wounds, even as the light and heat of the blessed sun—"

"Pardon me, sir," said Don Silverio, "at any other moment it would be my dearest privilege to listen to your eloquence. But time passes. I came here on a practical errand. I desire to take back some definite answer to Adone and Clelia Alba. Am I to understand from you that the municipality, on behalf of these foreign companies, desires to purchase his land, and even insists upon its right to do so?"

The syndic accustomed to seek shelter from all plain speaking in the cover of flowery periods such as these in which he had been arrested, was driven from his usual refuge. He could not resume the noble and enlightened discourse which had been thus recklessly cut in two. He tied the strings of the portfolio into a bow, and undid them, and tied them again.

"I have received you, sir, *ex officio*," he re-

plied after a long silence. "You address me as if I possessed some special individual power. I have none. I am but the mouthpiece, the representative of my administrative council. You, a learned ecclesiastic, cannot want to be taught what are the functions of a syndic."

"I am to understand then that I must address myself on behalf of my people to the Prefect?"

Corradini was silent. The last thing he desired was for this importunate priest to see the Prefect.

"I must go into council at once," he said, again looking at his watch. "Could you return? Are you remaining here?"

"Some hours, sir."

"Will you dine with me at my house at three? You will give me much pleasure, and the Countess Corradini will be charmed."

"I am grateful for so much offered honour, but I have promised to make my noonday meal with an old friend, the superior of the Cistercians."

"An excellent, a holy person," said Corradini, with a bend of his head. "Be at my house, reverend sir, at five of the clock. I shall then have spoken with the assessors of your errand, and it will be dealt with probably in council."

Don Silverio made a low bow, and left him free to go to his awaiting councillors, who were already gathered round a long table covered by

green cloth, in a vaulted and stately chamber, with frescoes losing their colour on its walls, and stories from Greek mythology carved on its oaken doors and stone cornices.

"Pray excuse me, gentlemen," said the courtly mayor to his assessors, taking his seat on an old walnut-wood throne at the head of the table. "I have been detained by this matter of the Val d' Edera. I fear the people of that valley will show an ungrateful and refractory temper. How hard it is to persuade the ignorant where their true interests lie! But let us to business."

"It will be a hard matter," said the Prior to Don Silverio as they walked together in the little burial-ground of the monastery between its lines of rose-trees and its lines of crosses, after the frugal noonday meal had been eaten in the refectory. "It will be a hard matter. You will fail, I fear. The municipalities here smell money. That is enough to make them welcome the invasion. What can you do against the force of gold?"

"Would it avail anything to see the Prefect?"

"Nothing. He is cousin to the Minister of Agriculture, whose brother is chairman of the Teramo-Tronto Company. We are governed solely by what the French call *tripotage*."

"What character does this syndic bear?"

"A good one. He is blameless in his domestic

relations, an indulgent landlord, a gentleman, respectful of religion, assiduous in his duties; but he is in debt; his large estates produce little; he has no other means. I would not take upon me to say that he would be above a bribe."

At five of the clock, as the Syndic had told him to do, Don Silverio presented himself at the Palazzo Corradini. He was shown with much deference by an old liveried servant into a fine apartment with marble busts in niches in the walls and antique bookcases of oak, and door-hangings of Tuscan tapestry. The air of the place was cold, and had the scent of a tomb. It was barely illumined by two bronze lamps in which unshaded oil wicks burned. Corradini joined him there in five minutes' time, and welcomed him to the house with grace and warmth of courtesy.

"What does he want of me?" thought Don Silverio, who had not been often met in life by such sweet phrases. "Does he want me to be blind?"

"Dear and reverend sir," said the mayor, placing himself with his back to the brass lamps, "tell me fully about this youth whom you protect, who will not sell the Terra Vergine. Here we can speak at our ease; yonder at the municipality, there may be always some eavesdropper."

"Most worshipful, what I said is matter well known to the whole countryside; all the valley

can bear witness to its truth," replied Don Silverio, and he proceeded to set forth all that he knew of Adone and Clelia Alba, and of their great love for their lands; he only did not mention what he believed to be Adone's descent, because he feared that it might sound fantastical, or presumptuous. Nearly three hundred years of peasant ownership and residence were surely titles enough for consideration.

"If land owned thus, and tilled thus by one family, can be taken away from that family by Act of Parliament to please the greedy schemes of strangers, why preserve the eighth commandment in the Decalogue? It becomes absurd. There cannot be a more absolute ownership than this of the Alba to the farm they live on and cultivate. So long as there is any distinction at all between *meum et tuum,* how can its violent seizure be by any possibility defended?"

"There need be no violent seizure," said Corradini. "The young man will be offered a good price; even, since you are interested in him, a high price."

"But he will take no price—no price if he were paid millions; they would not compensate him for his loss."

"He must be a very singular young man."

"His character is singular, no doubt, in an age in which money is esteemed the sole goal of ex-

istence, and discontent constitutes philosophy. Adone Alba wants nothing but what he has; he only asks to be left alone."

"It is difficult to be left alone in a world full of other people! If your hero want a Thebaid he can go and buy one in La Plata or the Argentine with the price we shall give for his land."

"We?" repeated Don Silverio with significant emphasis.

Corradini reddened a little. "I use the word because I am greatly interested in the success of this enterprise, being convinced of its general utility to the province. Being cognisant as I am of the neighbourhood, I hoped I could prevent some friction."

"The shares are, I believe, already on the market?"

It was a harmless remark, yet it was a disagreeable one to the Syndic of San Beda.

"What would be the selling price of the Terra Vergine," he said abruptly? "It is valued at twelve thousand francs."

"It is useless to discuss its price," replied Don Silverio, "and the question is much wider than the limits of the Terra Vergine. In one word, is the whole of the Val d'Edera to be ruined because a Minister has a relation who desires to create an unnecessary railway?"

"Ruined is a large word. These constructions

appear to all, except primitive and ignorant people, to be improvements, acquisitions, benefits. In our province we are so aloof from all movement, so remote in our seclusion, so moss-grown in our antiquity, so wedded to the past, to old customs, old habits, old ways of act and thought, that the modern world shocks us as impious, odious, and intolerable."

"Sir," said Don Silverio with his most caustic smile, "if you are here to sing the praises of modernity, allow me to withdraw from the duet. I venture to ask you, as I asked you this morning, one plain question. To whom is Adone Alba, to whom are my people of Ruscino, to appeal against this sequestration?"

"To no one. The Prefect approves; the Minister approves; the local deputies approve; I and my municipal and provincial councils approve; Parliament has approved and authorised. Who remain opposed? A few small landowners and a mob of poor persons living in your village of Ruscino and in similar places."

"Who can create grave disorders and will do so."

"Disorders, even insurrections, do not greatly alarm authority nowadays; they are easily repressed since the invention of quick-firing guns. The army is always on the side of order."

Don Silverio rose.

"Most honourable Corradini! your views and mine are so far asunder that no amount of discussion can assimilate them. Allow me to salute you."

"Wait one instant, reverence," said the syndic. "May I ask how it is that an ecclesiastic of your appearance and your intellect can have been buried so long in such an owls' nest as Ruscino?"

"Sir," replied Don Silverio very coldly, "ask my superiors; I am but one of the least of the servants of the Church."

"You might be one of her greatest servants, if influence—"

"I abhor the word influence. It means a bribe too subtle to be punished, too gilded to alarm."

"Nay, sometimes it is but a word in season, a pressure in the right place."

"It means that which cannot serve the poor man without degrading him."

"But—but—if as a reward for duty, advancement came to you?"

"I fail to understand."

"Let me speak frankly. With your superiority to them you must easily rule the embryo rioters of the Val d'Edera. If, to your efforts it should be owing that the population remain quiet, and that this Adone Alba and others in a similar position,

come to me in an orderly manner and a pliant spirit, I will engage that this service to us on your part shall not be forgotten."

He paused; but Don Silverio did not reply.

"It is lamentable and unjust," continued the mayor, "that one of your evident mental powers and capacity for higher place should be wasting your years and wasting your mind in a miserable solitude like Ruscino. If you will aid us to a pacific cession of the Val d' Edera I will take upon myself to promise that your translation to a higher office shall be favoured by the Government——"

He paused again, for he did not see upon Don Silverio's countenance that flattered and rejoiced expression which he expected; there was even upon it a look of scorn. He regretted that he had said so much.

"I thank your Excellency for so benevolent an interest in my poor personality," said Don Silverio. "But with the King's government I have nothing to do. I am content in the place whereto I have been called, and have no disposition to assist the speculations of foreign companies. I have the honour to bid your Excellency good evening."

He bowed low, and backed out of the apartment this time. Count Corradini did not endeavour to detain him.

When he got out into the air the strong moun-

tain wind was blowing roughly down the steep and narrow street. He felt it with pleasure smite his cheeks and brows.

"Truly only from nature can we find strength and health," he murmured. "In the houses of men there are but fever and corruption, and uncleanliness."

XIV

To neglect no possible chance, he resolved to see the Prefect, if the Prefect consented to see him. This great official dwelt in a seaport city, whence he ruled the province, for such a period at least as his star should be in the ascendant, that is, whilst his political group should be in power. It was scarcely likely that a government official would be accessible to any arguments which a poor country priest could bring forward against a government project. Still, he resolved to make the effort, for at the Prefect's name apprehension, keen and quaking, had leapt into Count Corradini's faded eyes.

From San Beda to the seaport city there stretched some forty miles of distance; the first part a descent down the spurs of the Apennines the latter half through level sandy country, with pine woods here and there. The first half he covered on foot, the second by the parliamentary train, which drew its long black line, snake-like and slow, through the dunes and the stagnant waters. He had but a few francs in his waistband, and could ill afford to expend those.

When he reached his destination it was even-

ing; too late for him to present himself at the Prefecture with any chance of admittance. The Prior at San Beda had given him a letter to the vicar of the church of Sant Anselmo in the city, and by this gentleman he was warmly received and willingly lodged for the night.

"A government project—a project approved by ministers and deputies?" said his host on hearing what was the errand on which he came there. "As well, my brother, might you assail the Gran Sasse d'Italia! There must be money in it, much money, for our Conscript Fathers."

"I suppose so," said Don Silverio, "but I cannot see where it is to come from."

"From the pockets of the taxpayers, my friend!" replied the incumbent of Sant Anselmo, with a smile as of a man who knows the world he lives in. "The country is honeycombed by enterprises undertaken solely to this end—to pass the money which rusts in the pockets of fools into those of wise men who know how to make it run about and multiply. In what other scope are all our betterments, our hygiene, our useless railway lines, our monstrous new streets, all our modernisation, put in the cauldron and kept boiling like a witch's supper?"

"I know, I know," said Don Silverio wearily. "The whole land is overrun by *affaristi*, like red ants."

"Do not slander the ants!" replied his host; "I would not offend the name of any honest, hard-working, little insect by giving it to the men through whom this country is eaten up by selfish avarice and unscrupulous speculation! But tell me, what do you hope for from our revered Prefect?"

"I hope nothing, but I wish to leave no stone unturned. Tell me of him."

"Of his Excellency, Giovacchino Gallo, senator and deputy and what not? There is much to tell, though there is nothing which could not be also told of many another gentleman in high place. It is the usual story; the supple spine, the sharp eye, the greased foot. He was a young lawyer, useful to deputies. He married a lovely woman whom a prince had admired beyond him. He asked no questions; her dower was large. To do him justice, he has always behaved very well to her. He entered Parliament early, and there was useful also, to existing institutions. He was instrumental in carrying many railway and canal bills through the chamber. He has been always successful in his undertakings, and he knows that nothing succeeds like success. I am told that he and his wife are *persone gratissime* at the Quirinale, and that her jewels are extremely fine. When he was named Senator two years ago the Press,

especially the Press of the Right, saluted his nomination as strengthening the Senate by the accession to it of a person of impeccable virtue, of enlightened intellect, and of a character cast in antique moulds of noble simplicity and Spartan courage. You think, my brother, that this favourite of fortune is likely to favour your plea for your parishioners?"

"Dear and revered brother," replied Don Silverio, "I came hither with no such illusions. If I had done, your biography of this functionary would have dispelled them."

Nevertheless, although without hope, at two o'clock of that day he went to the audience which was granted him at the intervention of the bishop of the city, obtained by means of the vicar of Sant Anselmo.

The Prefecture was situated in a palace of sixteenth century architecture, a noble and stately place of immense size, greatly injured by telegraph and telephone wires stretching all round it, the post-office and the tax offices being situated on the ground floor, and the great Central Court daubed over with fresh paint and whitewash. Some little soldiers in dingy uniforms, ill-cut and ill-fitting, stood about gates and doors. On the first floor were the apartments occupied by his Excellency. Don Silverio was kept waiting for

some time in a vestibule of fine proportions painted by Diotisalvi, with a colossal marble group in its centre of the death of Cæsar.

He looked at it wistfully.

"Ah, Giulio!" he murmured, "what use were your conquests, what use was your genius, the greatest perchance the world has ever seen? What use? You were struck in the throat like a felled ox, and the land you ruled lies bleeding at every pore!"

In a quarter of an hour he was ushered through other large rooms into one of great architectural beauty, where the Prefect was standing by a writing-table.

Giovacchino Gallo was a short, stout person with a large stomach, a bald head, bright restless eyes, and a high, narrow forehead; his face was florid, like the face of one to whom the pleasures of the table are not alien. His address was courteous but distant, stiff, and a little pompous; he evidently believed in himself as a great person, and only unbent to other greater persons, when he unbent so vastly that he crawled.

"What can I do for your Reverence?" he asked, as he seated himself behind the writing-table and pointed to a chair.

The words were polite but the tone was curt; it was officialism crystallised.

Don Silverio explained the purpose of his visit.

and urged the prayers of his people. "I am but the vicar of Ruscino," he said in explanation, "but in this matter I plead for all the natives of the Val d'Edera. Your Excellency is Governor of this part of the province in which the Edera takes its rise, and has its course. My people, and all those others who are not under my ministry, but whose desires and supplications I represent, venture to look to you for support in their great distress, and intercession for them against this calamity."

The face of the Prefect grew colder and sterner, his eyes got an angry sparkle, his plump, rosy hands closed on a malachite paper-knife; he wished the knife were of steel, and the people of the Val d'Edera had but one head.

"Are you aware, sir," he said impatiently, "that the matter of which you speak has had the ratification of Parliament?"

"But it has not had the ratification of the persons whom it most concerns."

"Do you suppose, then, when a great public work is to be accomplished the promoters are to go hat in hand for permission to every peasant resident on the area?"

"A great public work seems to me a large expression; too large for this case. The railway is not needed. The acetylene works are a private

speculation. I venture to recall to your Excellency that these people, whom you would ignore, own the land, or, where they do not own it, have many interests both in the land and the water."

"Their interests are considered and will be compensated," said the Prefect. "I do not admit that any of them can claim more."

"Pardon me, your Excellency, but that is a phrase: it is not a fact. You could not, if you gave them millions, compensate them for the seizure of their river and their lands. These belong to them and to their descendants by natural right. They cannot be deprived of these by Act of Parliament without gross injury and injustice."

"There must be suffering for the individual in all benefit of the general!"

"And doubtless, sir, when one is not the individual the suffering appears immaterial!"

"What an insolent priest!" thought Giovacchino Gallo, and struck the paper-knife with anger on the table.

"Take my own parishioners alone," pursued Don Silverio. "Their small earnings depend entirely upon the Edera water; it gives them their food, their bed, their occupation; it gives them health and strength; it irrigates their little holdings, *extra muros,* on which they and their families depend for grain and maize and rice. If you

change their river-bed into dry land they will starve. Are not your own countrymen dearer to you than the members of a foreign syndicate?"

"There will be work for them at the acetylene factory."

"Are they not free men? Are they to be driven like slaves to a work which would be hateful to them? These people are country born and country bred. They labour in the open air, and have done so for generations. Pardon me, your Excellency, but every year the King's Government forces into exile thousands, tens of thousands, of our hard-working peasants with their families. The taxation of the land and of all its products lay waste thousands of square miles in this country. The country is being depleted and depopulated, and the best of its manhood is being sent out of it by droves to Brazil, to La Plata, to the Argentines, to anywhere and everywhere, where labour is cheap and climate homicidal. The poor are packed on emigrant ships and sent with less care than crates of fruit receive. They consent to go because they are famished here. Is it well for a country to lose its labouring classes, its frugal, willing, and hard-working manhood? to pack them off across the oceans by contract with other states? The Government has made a contract with a Pacific island for five thousand Italians?

Are they free men or are they slaves? Can your Excellency call my people free who are allowed no voice against the seizure of their own river, and to whom you offer an unwholesome and indoor labour as compensation for the ruin of their lives? Now, they are poor indeed, but they are contented; they keep body and soul together, they live on their natal soil, they live as their fathers lived. Is it just, is it right, is it wise to turn these people into disaffection and despair by an act of tyranny and spoliation through which the only gainers will be foreign speculators abroad and at home the gamblers of the Bourses? Sir, I do not believe that the world holds people more patient, more long-suffering, more pacific under dire provocation, or more willing to subsist on the poorest and hardest conditions than Italians are; is it right or just or wise to take advantage of that national resignation to take from half a province the natural air and the natural beauty with which God himself has dowered it in the gift of the mountain-born stream? You are powerful, sir, you have the ear of the Government, will you not try to stop this infamous theft of the Edera water whilst there is still time?"

Don Silverio spoke with that eloquence and with that melody of voice which few could bear unmoved; and even the dull ear and the hard heart of the official who heard him were for one

brief moment moved as by the pathos of a song sung by some great tenor.

But that moment was very brief. Over the face of Giovacchino Gallo a look passed at once brutal and suspicious. "Curse this priest!" he thought; "he will give us trouble."

He rose, stiff, cold, pompous, with a frigid smile upon his red, full *bon viveur's* lips.

"If you imagine that I should venture to attack, or even presume to criticise, a matter which the Most Honourable the Minister of Agriculture has in his wisdom approved and ratified, you must have a strange conception of my fitness for my functions. As regards yourself, Reverend Sir, I regret that you appear to forget that the chief duty of your sacred office is to inculcate to your flock unquestioning submission to Governmental decrees."

"Is that your Excellency's last word?"

"It is my first, and my last, word."

Don Silverio bowed low.

"You may regret it, sir," he said simply, and left the writing-table and crossed the room. But as he approached the door the Prefect, still standing, said, "Wait!"

Gallo opened two or three drawers in his table searched for some papers, looked over them, leaving the priest always standing between him and the door. Don Silverio was erect; his tall, frail

form had a great majesty in it; his pallid features were stern.

"Return a moment," said Gallo.

"I can hear your Excellency where I am," replied Don Silverio, and did not stir."

"I have here reports from certain of my agents," said Gallo, fingering his various papers, "that there is and has been for some time a subversive movement amongst the sparse population of the Val d'Edera."

Don Silverio did not speak or stir.

"It is an agrarian agitation," continued Gallo, "limited in its area, with little probability of spreading, but it exists; there are meetings by night, both open-air and secret meetings; the latter take place now in one farmhouse, now in another. The leader of this noxious and unlawful movement is one Adone Alba. He is of your parish."

He lifted his eyelids and flashed a quick, searching glance at the priest.

"He is of my parish," repeated Don Silverio, with no visible emotion.

"You know of this agitation?"

"If I did, sir, I should not say so. But I am not in the confidence of Adone Alba."

"Of course I do not ask you to reveal the secrets of the confessional, but——"

"Neither in the confessional or out of it have

I heard anything whatever from him concerning any such matter as that of which you speak."

"He is a young man?"

"Yes."

"And owner of the land known as the Terra Vergine?"

"Yes."

"And his land is comprised in that which will be taken by the projected works?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure that he has not sent you here?"

"My parishioners are not in the habit of 'sending' me anywhere. You reverse our respective positions."

"Humility is not one of your ecclesiastical virtues, Most Reverend."

"It may be so."

Galba thrust his papers back into their drawer and locked it with a sharp click.

"You saw the Syndic of San Beda?"

"I did."

"What did he say to you?"

"Much what you say. Official language is always limited and learned by rote."

Galba would willingly have thrown his bronze inkstand at the insolent ecclesiastic; his temper was naturally choleric, though years of sycophancy and state service had taught him to control it.

"Well, Reverend Sir!" he said, with ill-concealed irritation, "this conversation is I see useless. You protect and screen your people. Perhaps I cannot blame you for that, but you will allow me to remind you that it is my duty to see that the order and peace of this district are not in any manner disturbed; and that any parish priest if he fomented dissatisfaction or countenanced agitation in his district, would be much more severely dealt with by me than any civilian would be in the same circumstances. We tolerate and respect the Church so long as she remains strictly within her own sphere, but so long only."

"We are all perfectly well aware of the conditions attached to the *placet* and the *exequator* at all times, and we are all conscious that even the limited privileges of civilians are denied to us!" replied Don Silverio. "I have the honour to wish your Excellency good morning."

He closed the door behind him.

"Damnation!" said Giovacchino Gallo; "that is a strong man! Is Mother Church blind that she lets such an one rust and rot in the miserable parish of Ruscino?"

When Don Silverio rejoined the Vicar of Sant Anselmo the latter asked him anxiously how his errand had sped.

"It was waste of breath and of words," he an-

swered. "I might have known that it would be so with any Government official."

"But you might have put a spoke in Count Corradini's wheel. If you had told Gallo that the other is trafficking——"

"Why should I betray a man who received me in all good faith? And what good would it have accomplished if I had done so?"

And more weary than ever in mind and body he returned to Ruscino.

As he had left the Prefect's presence that eminent person had rung for his secretary.

"Brandone, send me Sarelli."

In a few moments Sarelli appeared; he was the usher of the Prefecture by appointment; by taste and in addition he was its chief spy. He was a native of the city, and a person of considerable acumen and excellent memory; he never needed to make memoranda—there is nothing so dangerous to an official as written notes.

"Sarelli, what are the reports concerning the vicar of Ruscino?"

Sarelli stood respectfully at attention; he had been a non-commissioned officer of artillery, and answered in rapid but clear tones:

"Great ability—great eloquence—disliked by superiors; formerly great preacher in Rome; supposed to be at Ruscino as castigation; learned—benevolent—correct."

"Humph!" said Gallo, disappointed. "Not likely then to cause trouble or disorder?—to necessitate painful measures?"

Sarelli rapidly took his cue.

"Hitherto, your Excellency, uniformly correct; except in one instance——"

"That instance?"

"Was five years ago, in the matter of the *malandrino,* Ferrero. Your Excellency will have heard of Ferrero Ulisse, a great robber of the lower Abruzzi?"

"I have: continue."

"Ferrero Ulisse was outlawed; his band had been killed or captured, every one; he had lost his right arm; he hid for many years in the lower woods of the Abruzzi; he came down at night to the farmhouses, the people gave him food and drink, and aided him——"

"Their criminal habit always: continue."

"Sometimes in one district, sometimes in another, he was often in the *macchia* of the Val d'Edera. The people of the district, and especially of Ruscino, protected him. They thought him a saint, because once when at the head of his band, which was then very strong, he had come into Ruscino and done them no harm, but only eaten and drunk, and left a handful of silver pieces to pay for what he and his men had taken. So they protected him now, and oftentimes for

more than a year he came out of the *macchia,* and the villagers gave him all they could, and he went up and down Ruscino as if he were a king; and this lasted for several seasons, and, as we learned afterwards, Don Silverio Frascaro had cognisance of this fact, but did nothing. When Ferrero Ulisse was at last captured (it is nine years ago come November, and it was not in Ruscino but in the woods above), and brought to trial, many witnesses were summoned, and amongst them this Don Silverio; and the judge said to him, 'You had knowledge that this man came oftentimes into your parish?' and Don Silverio answered, 'I had.' 'You knew that he was an outlaw, in rupture with justice?' 'I did,' he answered. Then the judge struck his fist with anger on his desk. 'And you a priest, a guardian of order, did not denounce him to the authorities?' Then Don Silverio, your Excellency, quite quietly, but with a smile (for I was there close to him), had the audacity to answer the judge. 'I am a priest,' he said, 'and I study my breviary, but I do not find in it any command which authorises me to betray my fellow-creatures.' That made a terrible stir in the tribunal, your Excellency. They talked of committing him to gaol for contempt of court and for collusion with the outlaw. But it took place at San Beda, where

they are all *papalini,* as your Excellency knows, and nothing was done, sir."

"That reply is verily like this priest!" thought Giovacchino Gallo. "A man of ability, of intellect, of incorruptible temper, but a man as like as not to encourage and excuse sedition."

Aloud he said, "You may go, Sarelli. Good morning."

"May I be allowed a word, sir?"

"Speak."

"May it not well be, sir, that Don Silverio's organisation or suggestion is underneath this insurrectionary movement of the young men in the Val d'Edera?"

"It is possible; yes. See to it."

"Your servant, sir."

Sarelli withdrew, elated. He loved tracking, like a bloodhound, for the sheer pleasure of the "cold foot chase." The official views both layman and priest with contempt and aversion; both are equally his prey, both equally his profit; he lives by them and on them, as the galleruca does on the elm tree, whose foliage it devours, but he despises them because they are not officials, as the galleruca doubtless, if it can think, despises the elm.

XV

Of course his absence could not be hidden from any in his parish. The mere presence of the rector of an adjacent parish, who had taken his duties, sufficed to reveal it. For so many years he had never stirred out of Ruscino in winter cold or summer heat, that none of his people could satisfactorily account to themselves for his now frequent journeys. The more sagacious supposed that he was trying to get the project for the river undone; but they did not all have so much faith in him. Many had always been vaguely suspicious of him, he was so wholly beyond their comprehension. They asked Adone what he knew, or, if he knew nothing, what he thought. Adone put them aside with an impatient, imperious gesture. "But you knew when he went to Rome?" they persisted. Adone swung himself loose from them with a movement of anger. It hurt him to speak of the master he had renounced, of the friend he had forsaken. His conscience shrank from any distrust of Don Silverio; yet his old faith was no more alive. He was going rapidly down a steep descent, and in that downward rush he lost all his

higher instincts; he was becoming insensible to everything except the thirst for action, for vengeance.

To the man who lives in a natural state away from cities it appears only virile and just to defend himself, to avenge himself, with the weapons which nature and art have given him; he feels no satisfaction in creeping and crawling through the labyrinths of the law, and he cannot see why he, the wronged, should be forced to spend, and wait, and humbly pray, while the wrongdoer may go, in the end, unchastised. Such a tribunal as St. Louis held under an oak-tree, or the Emperor Akbar in a mango grove, would be intelligible to him; but the procedure, the embarrassments, the sophistries, the whole machinery of modern law are abhorrent to him.

He yearned to be the Tell, the Massaniello, the Andreas Hofer, of his province; but the apathy and supineness and timidity of his neighbours tied his hands. He knew that they were not made of the stuff with which a leader could hope to conquer. All his fiery appeals fell like shooting stars, brilliant but useless; all his vehement excitations did little more than scare the peasants whom he sought to rouse. A few bold spirits like his own seconded his efforts and aided his propaganda; but these were not numerous enough to leaven the inert mass.

His plan was primitive and simple: it was to oppose by continual resistance every attempt which should be made to begin the projected works upon the river; to destroy at night all which should be done in the day, and so harass and intimidate the workmen who should be sent there so that they should, in fear and fatigue, give up their labours. They would certainly be foreign workmen; that is, workmen from another province; probably from Apulia. It was said that three hundred of them were coming that week to begin the works above Ruscino. He reckoned that he and those he led would have the advantage of local acquaintance with the land and water, and could easily, having their own homes as base, carry on a guerilla warfare for any length of time. No doubt, he knew, the authorities would send troops to the support of the foreign labourers, but he believed that when the resolve of the district to oppose at all hazards any interference with the Edera should be made clear, the Government would not provoke an insurrection for the sake of favouring a foreign syndicate. So far as he reasoned at all, he reasoned thus.

But he forgot, or rather he did not know, that the lives of its people, whether soldiers or civilians, matter very little to any Government, and that its own vanity, which it calls dignity, and the financial interests of its supporters, matter greatly;

where the Executive has been defied there it is inexorable and unscrupulous.

Both up and down the river there was but one feeling of bitter rage against the impending ruin of the water; there was but one piteous cry of helpless desperation. But to weld this, which was mere emotion, into that sterner passion of which resistance and revolt are made, was a task beyond his powers.

"No one will care for us; we are too feeble, we are too small," they urged; they were willing to do anything were they sure it would succeed, but——

"But who can be sure of anything under heaven?" replied Adone. "You are never sure of your crops until the very last day that they are reaped and carried; yet you sow."

Yes, they granted that; but sowing grain was a safe, familiar labour; the idea of sowing lead and death alarmed them. Still there were some, most of them those who were dwellers on the river, or owners of land abutting on it, who were of more fiery temper, and these thought as Adone thought, that never had a rural people juster cause for rebellion; and these gathered around him in those meetings by night of which information had reached the Prefecture, for there are spies in every province.

Adone had changed greatly; he had grown thin

and almost gaunt; he had lost his beautiful aspect of adolescence; his eyes had no longer their clear and happy light; they were keen and fierce, and looked out defiantly from under his level brows.

He worked on his own land usually, by day, to stave off suspicion; but by night he scoured the country up and down the stream wherever he believed he could find proselytes or arms. He had no settled plan of action; he had no defined project; his only idea was to resist, to resist, to resist. Under a leader he would have been an invaluable auxiliary, but he had not knowledge enough of men, or of the way to handle them, to direct a revolt; and he had no knowledge whatever of stratagem, or manœuvre, or any of the manifold complications of guerilla warfare. His calm and dreamy life had not prepared him to be all at once a man of action: action was akin alike to his temperament and to his habits. All his heart, his blood, his imagination, were on fire; but behind them there was not that genius of conception and command which alone makes the successful chief of a popular cause.

His mother said nothing to disturb or deter him on his course, but in herself she was sorely afraid. She kept her lips shut because she would have thought it unworthy to discourage him, and she could not believe in his success, try how she might to compel her faith to await miracles.

Little Nerina alone gave him that unquestioning, unhesitating, blind belief which is so dear to the soul of man. Nerina was convinced that at his call the whole of the Val d'Edera would rise full-armed, and that no hostile power on earth would dare to touch the water. To her any miracle seemed possible. Whatever he ordered, she did. She had neither fear or hesitation. She would slip out of her room unheard, and speed over the dark country on moonless nights on his errands; she would seek for weapons and bring them in and distribute them; she would take his messages to those on whom he could rely, and rouse to his cause the hesitating and half-hearted by repetition of his words. Her whole young life had caught fire at his; and her passionate loyalty accepted without comprehending all he enjoined on her or told to her.

The danger which she ran and the concealment of which she was guilty, never disturbed her for an instant. What Adone ordained was her law. Had he not taken pity on her in her misery that day by the river? Was she not to do anything and everything to serve him and save the river? This was her sole creed; but it sufficed to fill her still childish soul. If with it there was mingled a more intense and more personal sentiment, she was unconscious of, and he indifferent to, it. He sent her to do his bidding as he would have sent

a boy, because he recognized in her that leal and fervent fidelity to a trust of which he was not sure in others.

Although she was a slender brown thing, like a nightingale, she was strong, elastic, untiring; nothing seemed to fatigue her; she always looked as fresh as the dew, as vigorous as a young cherry-tree. Her big hazel eyes danced under their long lashes, and her pretty mouth was like one of the four-season roses which bloomed on the house wall. She was not thought much to look at in a province where the fine Roman type is blended with the Venetian colouring in the beauty of its women; but she had a charm and a grace of her own; wild and rustic, like that of a spray of grass or a harvest mouse swinging on a stalk of wheat.

She was so lithe, so swift, so agile; so strong without effort, so buoyant and content, that she carried with her the sense of her own perfect health and happiness, as the east wind blowing up the Edera water bore with it the scent of the sea.

But of any physical charm in her Adone saw nothing. A great rage filled his soul, and a black cloud seemed to float between him and all else which was not the wrong done to him and his and the water of Edera. Until he should have lifted off the land and the stream this coming

curse which threatened them, life held nothing for him which could tempt or touch him.

He used the girl for his own purposes and did not spare her; but those purposes were only those of his self-imposed mission, and of all which was youthful, alluring, feminine, in her he saw nothing: she was to him no more than a lithe, swift, hardy filly would have been which he should have ridden over the moors and pastures to its death in pursuit of his end. He who had been always so tender of heart had grown cruel; he would have flung corpse upon corpse into the water if by such holocaust he could have reached his purpose. What had drawn him to Nerina had been that flash of ferocity which he had seen in her; that readiness to go to the bitter end in the sweet right of vengeance; instincts which formed so singular a contrast to the childish gaiety and the sunny goodwill of her normal disposition.

He knew that nothing which could have been done to her would have made her reveal any confidence he placed in her. That she was often out all the hours of the night on errands to the widely scattered dwellings of the peasants did not prevent her coming at dawn into the cattle stalls to feed and tend the beasts.

And she was so dexterous, so sure, so silent; even the sharp eyes of old Gianna never detected her nocturnal absence, even the shrewd observation of Clelia Alba never detected any trace of

fatigue in her or any negligence in her tasks. She was always there when they needed her, did all that she was used to do, was obedient to every word or sign; they did not know that as she carried the water pails, or cut the grass, or swept the bricks, or washed the linen, her heart sung proudly within her a joyous song because she shared a secret—a perilous secret—of which the elder woman knew nothing. Any night a stray shot might strike her as she ran over the moors, or through the heather; any night a false step might pitch her headlong into a ravine or a pool; any night, returning through the shallows of the ford, she might miss her footing and fall into one of the bottomless holes that the river hid in its depths; but the danger of it only endeared her errand the more to her; made her the prouder that she was chosen for it.

"I fear nothing," she said to him truthfully; "I fear only that you should not be content."

And as signal fires run from point to point, or hill to hill, so she ran from one farm house to another bearing the messages which organized those gatherings whereof Giavacchino Gallo had the knowledge. The men she summoned and spoke with were rough peasants, for the most part, rude as the untanned skins they wore at their work, but not one of them ever said a gross word or gave a lewd glance to the child.

She was *la bimba* to them all; a brave little soul

and honest; they respected her as if she were one of their own children, or one of their own sisters, and Nerina coming through the starlight, with an old musket slung at her back, which Adone had taught her to use, and her small, bronzed feet leaping over the ground like a young goat's, was a figure which soon became familiar and welcome to the people. She seemed to them like a harbinger of hope; she had few words, but those words reverberated with courage and energy; she moved the supine, she braced the timid; she brought the wavering firmness, and the nervous strength; she said what Adone had taught her to say, but she put into it all her own immense faith in him, all her own innocent and undoubting certainty that his cause was just and would be blessed by heaven.

The Edera water belonged to them. Would they let it be turned away from their lands and given to strangers?

As a little spaniel or beagle threshes a covert, obedient to his master's will and working only to please him, so she scoured the country-side and drove in, by persuasion, or appeal, or threat, all those who would lend ear to her, to the midnight meetings on the moors, or in the homesteads, where Adone harangued them, with eloquence ever varied, on a theme which was never stale, because it appealed at once to the hearts and to the interests of his hearers.

But many of them, though fascinated, remained afraid.

"When all is said, what can we do?" they muttered. "Authority has a long arm."

The people of the district talked under their breath of nothing else than of this resistance which was being preached as a holy war by the youth of the Terra Vergine. They were secret and silent, made prudent by many generations which had suffered from harsh measures and brutal reprisals, but the league he proclaimed fascinated and possessed them. Conspiracy has a seduction subtle and irresistible as gambling for those who have once become its servants. It is potent as wine, and colours the brain which it inflames. To these lowly, solitary men, who knew nothing beyond their own fields and coppices and waste-lands, its excitement came like a magic philter to change the monotony of their days. They were most of them wholly unlettered; knew not their A B C; had only learned the law of the seasons, and the earth, and the trees which grew, and the beasts which grazed; but they had imagination; they had the blood of ancient races; they were neither dolts nor boors, though Adone in his wrath called them so. They were fascinated by the call to rise and save their river. A feeling, more local than patriotism, but more noble than interest, moved them to share in his passionate

hatred of the intruders, and to hearken to his appeals to them to arm and rise as one man.

But, on the other hand, long years of servitude and hardship had made them timid as gallant dogs are made so by fasting or the whip. "What are we?" some of them said to him. "We are no more than the earthworms in the soil." For there is a pathetic humility in these descendants of the ancient rulers of the world; it is a humility born of hope deferred, of the sense of every change being but a change of masters, of the knowledge that the sun rises and sets upon their toil, as it did on that of their fathers, as it will do on that of their children, and will never see it lessened, nor see the fruits thereof given to themselves or to their sons. It is a humility which is never ignoble, but is infinitely, because hopelessly, sad.

The river was their own, surely, yes; but, like so much else that was their own, the State claimed it.

"What can be more yours than the son you beget, the fruit of your loins, the child for whom you have laboured through long years?" said an old man to him once. "Yet the State, as soon as he is of use to you, the State takes him, makes a beast of burden of him, kills his youth and his manhood; sends him, without a word to you, to be maimed and slaughtered in Africa, his very

place of death unknown to you; his body—the body you begat and which his mother bore in her womb and nourished and cherished—is devoured by the beasts of the desert and the birds of the air. They take all; why shall they not take the river also?"

The glowing faith of Adone was flung, as the sunlit salt spray of the ocean is cast on a cliff of basalt, against the barrier of that weary and prostrate despair which the State dares to tell the poor is their duty and their portion upon earth.

But the younger men listened to him more readily, being less bent and broken by long labour, and poor food, and many years of unanswered prayers. Of these some had served their time in regiments, and aided him to give some knowledge of drill and of the use of weapons to those who agreed with him to dispute by force the claim of strangers to the Edera water.

These gatherings took place on waste lands or bare heaths, or in clearings or hollows in the woods, and the tramp of feet and click of weapons scared the affrighted fox and the astounded badger. They dared not fire lest the sound should betray their whereabouts to some unfriendly ear; but they went through all other military exercises as far as it lay in their power to do so.

The extreme loneliness of the Edera valley was in their favour. Once in half a year, perhaps,

half a troop of carabineers might ride through the district, but this was only if there had been any notable assassination or robbery; and of police there was none nearer than the town of San Beda.

It was to arrange these nightly exercises, and summon to or warn off men from them, as might be expedient, that Nerina was usually sent upon her nocturnal errands. One night when she had been bidden by Adone to go to a certain hamlet in the woods to the north, the child, as she was about to slip back the great steel bolts which fastened the house door, saw a light upon the stairs which she had just descended, and turning round, her hand upon the lock, saw Clelia Alba.

"Why are you out of your bed at this hour?" said the elder woman. Her face was stern and dark.

Nerina did not answer; her gay courage forsook her; she trembled.

"Why?" asked Adone's mother.

"I was going out," answered the child. Her voice shook. She was clothed as usual in the daytime, but she had over her head a woollen wrapper. She had not her musket, for she kept it in the hen-house, and was accustomed to take it as she passed that place.

"Going out! At the fourth hour of the night? Is that an answer for a decent maiden?"

Nerina was silent.

"Go back to your room, and I will lock you in it; in the morning you will account to me."

Nerina recovered her self-possession, though she trembled still.

"Pardon me, Madama Clelia," she said humbly, "I must go out."

She did not look ashamed, and her small brown face had a resolute expression.

A great anguish seized and wrung the heart of Clelia Alba. She knew that Adone was not in the house. Did he, the soul of purity and honour, seduce a girl who dwelt under his own roof?—carry on an intrigue with a little beggar, to his own shame and the outrage of his mother? Was this the true cause of his frequent absence, his many nights abroad? Her dark brows contracted, her black eyes blazed.

"Go to your room, wanton!" she said in tones of thunder. "In the morning you will answer to me."

But Nerina, who had before this slipped the bolts aside, and who had always kept her grasp upon the great key in the lock, suddenly turned it, pushed the oak door open, and before the elder woman was conscious of what she was doing, had dashed out into the air, and slammed the door behind her. The rush of wind had blown out the lamp in Clelia Alba's hand.

When, after fumbling vainly for some minutes

to find the door, and bruising her hands against the wall and an oaken chair, she at last found it and thrust it open, the night without was moonless and starless and stormy, and in its unillumined blackness she saw no trace of the little girl. She went out on to the doorstep and listened, but there was no sound. The wind was high; the perfume of the stocks and wallflowers was strong; far away the sound of the river rushing through the sedges was audible in the intense stillness, an owl hooted, a night jar sent forth its sweet, strange, sighing note. Of Nerina there was no trace. Clelia Alba came within and closed the door, and locked and bolted it.

The old woman Gianna had come downstairs with a lighted rush candle in her hand; she was scared and afraid.

"What is it? what is it, madama?"

Clelia Alba dropped down on the chair by the door.

"It is—it is—that the beggar's spawn you would have me shelter is the leman of my son; and he has dishonoured his house and mine."

Gianna shook her grey head in solemn denial and disbelief.

"Sior'a, Clelia, do not say such words or think such thoughts of your son or of the child. She is as harmless as any flower that blows out there in the garden, and he is a noble youth, though

now, by the wickedness of men, distraught and off his head. What makes you revile them so?"

"They are both out this night. Is not that enough?"

Gianna was distressed; from her chamber above she had heard the words which had passed between Adone's mother and Nerina, and knew the girl was gone.

"I would condemn others, but not Adone and the child," she returned. "For sure they do not do right to have secrets from you, but they are not such secrets as you think."

"Enough!" said Clelia Alba sternly. "The morning will show who is right. It suffices for me that the son of Valerio Alba, my son, has forgot his duty to his mother and his respect for himself."

Clelia Alba rose with effort from her chair, relighted her lamp at the old woman's rush candle, and went slowly and heavily up the stairs. She felt stunned and outraged. Her son!—hers! to lie out of nights with a little nameless vagrant!

Gianna caught hold of her skirt. "Madama—listen. I saw him born that day by the Edera water, and I have seen him every day of his life since till now. He would never do a base thing. Do not you, his mother, disgrace him by thinking of it for an hour. This thing is odd, is ugly, is strange, but wait to judge it——"

Clelia Alba released her skirt from her old servant's grasp.

"You mean well, but you are crazed. Get you gone."

Gianna let go her hold and crept submissively down the stair. She set her rushlight on the floor and sat down in the chair by the door, and told her beads with shaking fingers. One or other of them, she thought, might come home either soon or late, for she did not believe that any amorous intimacy was the reason that they were both out—God knew where—in this windy, pitch-dark night.

"But he does wrong, he does wrong," she thought. "He sends the child on his errands perhaps, but he should remember a girl is like a peach, you cannot handle it ever so gently but its bloom goes; and he leaves us alone, two old women here, and we might have our throats cut before we should wake old Ettore in the stable."

The night seemed long to her in the lone stone entrance, with the owls hooting round the house, and the winds blowing loud and tearing the tiles from the roof. Above, in her chamber, Adone's mother walked to and fro all night sleepless.

XVI

GIANNA before it was dawn went out in the hope that she might meet Adone on his return, and be able to speak to him before he could see his mother. She was also in extreme anxiety for Nerina, of whom she had grown fond. She did not think the little girl would dare return after the words of Clelia Alba. She knew the child was courageous, but timid, like an otter or a swallow.

She went to the edge of the river and waited; he must cross it to come home; but whether he would cross higher up or lower down she could not tell. There was the faint light which preceded the rising of the sun. A great peace, a great freshness, were on the water and the land.

"Oh Lord, what fools we are!" thought the old woman. "The earth makes itself anew for us with every dawn, and our own snarling, and fretting, and mourning clouds it all over for us, and we only see our own silly souls!"

Soon, before the sun was rising, Adone came in sight, passing with firm accustomed step across the undressed trunks of trees which were here thrown across the river to make a passage lower

down the stream than the bridge of Ruscino. He was walking with spirit and ease, his head was erect, his belt was filled with arms, his eyes had sternness and command in them; he came from one of the military drillings in the woods, and had been content with it. Seeing old Gianna waiting there he understood that something must have happened, and his first fears were for his mother.

"Is she ill?" he cried, as he reached the bank of his own land.

"No; she is well in health," answered Gianna, "but she is sorely grieved and deeply angered; she found the girl Nerina going out at the dead of night."

Adone changed colour. He was silent. Gianna came close to him.

"The child and you both out all night, heaven knows where! What but one thing can your mother think?"

"If she thinks but one thing, that thing is false."

"Maybe. I believe so myself, but, Sior' Clelia will not. Why do you send the child out at such hours?"

"What did she say to my mother?"

"Nothing; only that she had to go."

"Faithful little soul!"

"Aye! And it is when little maids are faithful

like this that men ruin them. I do not want to speak without respect to you, Adone, for I have eaten your bread and been sheltered by your roof through many a year; but for whatever end you send that child out of nights, you do a bad thing, a cruel thing, a thing unworthy of your stock; and if I know Clelia Alba—and who should know her if not I?—she will never let Nerina enter her house again."

Adone's face grew dark.

"The house is mine. Nerina shall not be turned out of it."

"Perhaps it is yours; but it is your mother's too, and you will scarce turn out your mother for the sake of a little beggar-girl?"

Adone was silent; he saw the dilemma; he knew his mother's nature; he inherited it.

"Go you," he said at last; "go you and tell her that the child went out on my errands, indeed, but I have not seen her; there is no collusion with her, and she is not and never will be *dama* of mine."

"I will take her no such message, for she would not listen. Go you; say what you choose; perhaps she will credit you, perhaps she will not. Anyhow, you are warned. As for me, I will go and search for Nerina."

"Do you mean she has not returned?"

"Certainly she has not. She will no more dare to return than a kicked dog. You forget she is a

young thing, a creature of nothing; she thinks herself no more than a pebble or a twig. Besides, your mother called her a wanton. That is a word not soon washed out. She is humble as a blade of grass, but she will resent that. You have made much trouble with your rebellious work. You have done ill—ill—ill!"

Adone submitted mutely to the upbraiding; he knew he had done selfishly, wrongfully, brutally, that which had seemed well to himself with no consideration of others.

"Get you gone and search for the child," he said at last. "I will go myself to my mother."

"It is the least you can do. But you must not forget the cattle. Nerina is not there to see to them."

She pushed past him and went on to the foot-bridge; but midway across it she turned and called to him: "I lit the fire, and the coffee is on it. Where am I to look for the child? In the heather? in the woods? up in Ruscino? down in the lower valley? or may be at the presbytery?"

"Don Silverio is absent," Adone called back to her; and he passed on under the olive-trees towards his home. Gianna paused on the bridge and watched him till he was out of sight; then she went back herself by another path which led to the stables. A thought had struck her: Nerina was too devoted to the cattle to have let them

suffer; possibly she was even now attending to them in their stalls.

"She is a faithful little thing as he said!" the old servant muttered. "Yes; and such as she are born to labour and to suffer, and to eat the bread of bitterness."

"Where is she, Pierino?" she said to the old white dog; he was lying on the grass; if the girl were lost, she thought, Pierino would be away somewhere looking for her.

Gianna's heart was hard against Adone; in a dim way she understood the hopes and the schemes which occupied him, but she could not forgive him for sacrificing to them his mother and this friendless child. It was so like a man, she said to herself, to tear along on what he thought a road to glory, and never heed what he trampled down as he went—never heed any more than the mower heeds the daisies.

In the cattle stalls she found the oxen and the cows already watered, brushed, and content, with their pile of fresh grass beside them; there was no sound in the stables but of their munching and breathing, and now and then the rattle of the chains which linked them to their mangers.

"Maybe she is amongst the hay," thought Gianna, and painfully she climbed the wide rungs of the ladder which led to the hay loft. There, sure enough, was Nerina, sound asleep upon the

fodder. She looked very small, very young, very innocent.

The old woman thought of the first day that she had seen the child asleep on the stone bench by the porch; and her eyes grew dim.

"Who knows where you will rest to-morrow?" she thought; and she went backwards down the ladder noiselessly so as not to awaken a sleeper, whose awaking might be so sorrowful.

Gianna went back to the house and busied herself with her usual tasks; she could hear the voices of Adone and Clelia Alba in the chamber above; they sounded in altercation, but their words she could not hear.

It was at dawn that same day that Don Silverio returned from his interviews with Count Corradini and Senatore Gallo. When he reached Ruscino the little rector of the village in the woods had already celebrated mass. Don Silverio cleansed himself from the dust of travel, entered his church for his orisons, then broke his fast with bread and a plate of lentils, and whilst the day was still young took the long familiar way to the Terra Vergine. Whatever the interview might cost in pain and estrangement he felt that he dared not lose an hour in informing Adone of what was so dangerously known at the prefecture.

"He will not kill me," he thought; "and if he did, it would not matter much;—except for you,

my poor little man," he added to his dog Signorino, who was running gleefully in his shadow. Gianna saw him approaching as she looked from the kitchen window, and cried her thanks to the saints with passionate gratitude. Then she went out and met him.

"Praise be to the Madonna that you have come back, Reverendissimo!" she cried. "There are sore trouble and disputes under our roof."

"I grieve to hear that," he answered; and thought, "I fear I have lost my power to cast oil on the troubled waters."

He entered the great vaulted kitchen and sat down, for he was physically weary, having walked twenty miles in the past night.

"What you feel at liberty to tell me, let me hear," he said to the old servant.

Gianna told him in her picturesque warmly-coloured phrase what had passed between Sior' Clelia and the little girl in the night; and what she had herself said to Adone at dawn; and how Nerina was lying asleep in the hay-loft, being afraid, doubtless, to come up to the house.

Don Silverio listened with pain and indignation.

"What is he about to risk a female child on such errands? And why is his mother in such vehement haste to say cruel words and think unjust and untrue things?"

"They are unjust and untrue, sir, are they not?" said Gianna. "But it looked ill, you see; a little creature going out in the middle of the night, and to be sure she was but a vagrant when she came to us."

"And now—how does the matter stand? Has Adone convinced his mother of the girl's innocence?"

"Whew! That I cannot say, sir. They are upstairs; and their voices were loud an hour ago. Now they are still. I had a mind to go up, but I am afraid."

"Go up; and send Adone to me."

"He is perhaps asleep, sir; he came across the water at dawn."

"If so, wake him. I must speak to him without delay."

Gianna went and came down quickly.

"He is gone out to work in the fields, sir. Madama told me so. If he do not work, the land will go out of cultivation, sir."

"He may have gone to Nerina?"

"I do not think so, sir. But I will go back to the stable and see."

"And beg Sior' Clelia to come down to me."

He was left alone a few minutes in the great old stone chamber with its smell of dried herbs hanging from its rafters and of maize leaves baking in the oven.

The land would go out of cultivation—yes!—and the acetylene factories would take the place of the fragrant garden, the olive orchards, the corn lands, the pastures. He did not wonder that Adone was roused to fury; but what fury would avail aught? What pain, what despair, what tears, would stay the desecration for an hour? The hatchet would hew it all down, and the steam plough would pass over it all, and then the stone and the mortar, the bricks and the iron, the engines, and the wheels, and the cauldrons, would be enthroned on the ruined soil: the gods of a soulless age.

"Oh, the pity of it! The pity of it!" thought Don Silverio, as the blue sky shone through the grated window and against the blue sky a rose branch swung and a swallow circled.

"Your servant, Reverendissimo," said the voice of Clelia Alba, and Don Silverio rose from his seat.

"My friend," he said to her, "I find you in trouble, and I fear that I shall add to it. But tell me first, what is this tale of Nerina?"

"It is but this, sir; if Nerina enter here, I go."

"You cannot be serious!"

"If you think so, look at me."

He did look at her; at her severe aquiline features, at her heavy eyelids drooping over eyes of implacable wrath, at her firm mouth and jaw,

cold as if cut in marble. She was not a woman to trifle or to waver; perhaps she was one who having received offence would never forgive.

"But it is monstrous!" he exclaimed; "you cannot turn adrift a little friendless girl—you cannot leave your own house, your dead husband's house—neither is possible— you rave!"

"It is my son's house. He will harbour whom he will. But if the girl pass the doorstep I go. I am not too old to labour for myself."

"My good woman—my dear friend—it is incredible! I see what you believe, but I cannot pardon you for believing it. Even were it what you choose to think—which is not possible—surely your duty to a motherless and destitute girl of her tender years should counsel more benevolence?"

The face of Clelia Alba grew chillier and harder still.

"Sir, leave me to judge of my own duties as the mother of Adone, and the keeper of this house. He has told me that he is master here. I do not deny it. He is over age. He can bring her here if he chooses, but I go."

"But you must know the child cannot live here with a young man!"

"Why not?" said Clelia Alba, and a cruel smile passed over her face. "It seems to me more decent than lying out in the fields together night after night."

"Silence!" said Don Silverio in that tone which awed the boldest. "Of what avail is your own virtue if it makes you thus harsh, thus unbelieving, thus ready to condemn?"

"I claim no more virtue than any clean-living woman should possess; but Valerio Alba would not have brought his leman into my presence, neither shall his son do so."

"In your present mood words are wasted on you. Go to your chamber, Sior' Clelia, and entreat Heaven to soften your heart. There is sorrow enough in store for you without your creating misery out of suspicion and unbelief. This house will not long be either yours or Adone's."

He left the kitchen and went out into the air; Clelia Alba was too proud, too dogged, in her obstinacy to endeavour to detain him or to ask him what he meant.

"Where is Adone?" he asked of the old man Ettore, who was carrying manure in a great skip upon his back.

"He is down by the five apple-trees, sir," answered Ettore.

The five apple-trees were beautiful old trees, gnarled, moss-grown, hoary, but still bearing abundant blossoms; they grew in a field which was that year being trenched for young vines, a hard back-breaking labour; the trenches were being cut obliquely so as not to disturb the apple-trees or injure some fine fig-trees which grew

there. Adone was at work stripped to his shirt and hidden in the delved earth to his shoulders.

He looked up from the trench and lifted his hat as he saw the priest enter the field; then he resumed his labour.

"Come out of your ditch and hearken to me. I will not weary you with many words."

Adone, moved by long habit of obedience and deference, leapt with his agile feet on to the border of the trench and stood there, silent, sullen, ready to repel reproof with insolence.

"Is it worthy of you to ruin the name of a girl of sixteen by sending her on midnight errands to your fellow-rebels?"

Don Silverio spoke bluntly; he spoke only on suspicion, but his tone was that of a direct charge.

Adone did not doubt for a moment that he was in possession of facts.

"Has the girl played us false?" he said moodily.

"I have not seen the girl," replied Don Silverio. "But it is a base thing to do, to use that child for errands of which she cannot know either the danger or the illegality. You misuse one whose youth and helplessness should have been her greatest protection."

"I had no one else that I could trust."

"Poor little soul! You could trust her, so you abused her trust! No: I do not believe you are

her lover. I do not believe you care for her more than for the clod of earth you stand on. But to my thinking that makes what you have done worse; colder, more cruel, more calculating. Had you seduced her, you would at least feel that you owed her something. She has been a mere little runner, and slave to you—no more. Surely your knowledge that she depends on you ought to have sufficed to make her sacred?"

Adone looked on the ground. His face was red with the dull flush of shame. He knew that he merited all these words and more.

"I will provide temporarily for her; and you will send her out no more upon these errands," continued Don Silverio. "Perhaps, with time, your mother may soften to her; but I doubt it."

"The house is mine," said Adone sullenly. "She shall not keep Nerina out of it."

"You certainly cannot turn your mother away from her own hearth," replied Don Silverio with contempt. "I tell you I will take the girl to some place in Ruscino where she will be safe for the present time. But I came to say another thing to you as well as this. I have been away three days. I have seen the Prefect, Senatore Gallo. He has informed me that your intentions, your actions, your plans and coadjutors are known to him, and that he is aware that you are conspiring to organise resistance and riot."

A great shock struck Adone as he heard; he

felt as if an electric charge had passed through him. He had believed his secret to be as absolutely unknown as the graves of the lucomone under the ivy by the riverside."

"How could he know?" he stammered. "Who is the traitor?"

"That matters little," said Don Silverio. "What matters much is, that all you do and desire to do is written down at the Prefecture."

Adone was sceptical. He laughed harshly.

"If so, sir, why do they not arrest me? That would be easy enough. I do not hide."

"Have you not ofttimes seen a birdcatcher spread his net? Does he seize the first bird which approaches it? He is not so unwise. He waits until all the feathered innocents are in the meshes: then he fills his sack. That is how the government acts always. It gives its enemies full rope to hang themselves. It is cold of blood, and slow, and sure."

"You say this to scare me, to make me desist."

"I say it because it is the truth; and if you were not a boy, blind with rage and unreason, you would long since have known that such actions as yours, in rousing or trying to rouse the peasants of the Val d'Edera, must come to the ear of the authorities. Do not mistake. They let you alone as yet, not because they love you or fear you; but because they are too cunning and too wise to touch the pear before it is ripe."

Adone was silent. He was not convinced; and many evil thoughts were black within his brain. His first quarrel with a mother he adored had intensified all the desperate ferocity awake in him.

"You are as blind as a mole," said Don Silverio, "but you have not the skill of the mole in constructing its hidden galleries. You scatter your secrets broadcast as you scatter grain over your ploughed field. You think it is enough to choose a moonless night for you and your companions-in-arms to be seen by no living creature! Does the stoat, does the wild cat, make such a mistake as that? If you make war on the State, study the ways of your foe. Realise that it has as many eyes, as many ears, as many feet as the pagan god; that its arm is as long as its craft, that it has behind it unscrupulous force and unlimited gold, and the support of all those who only want to pursue their making of wealth in ease and in peace. Do you imagine you can meet and beat such antagonists with a few rusty muskets, a few beardless boys, a poor little girl like Nerina?"

Don Silverio's voice was curt, imperious, sardonic; his sentences cut like whips; then after a moment of silence his tone changed to an infinite softness and sweetness of pleading and persuasion.

"My son, my dear son! cease to live in this dream of impossible issues. Wake to the brutality of fact, to the nakedness of truth. You have to

suffer a great wrong; but will you be consoled for it by the knowledge that you have led to the slaughter men whom you have known from your infancy? It can but end in one way—your conflict with the power of the State. You and those who have listened to you will be shot down without mercy, or flung into prison, or driven to lead the life of tracked beasts in the woods. There is no other possible end to the rising which you are trying to bring about. If you have no pity for your mother, have pity on your comrades, for the women who bore them, for the women who love them."

Adone quivered with breathless fury as he heard. All the blackness of his soul gathered into a storm of rage, burst forth in shameful doubt and insult. He set his teeth, and his voice hissed through them, losing all its natural music.

"Sir, your clients are men in high place; mine are my miserable brethren. You take the side of the rich and powerful; I take that of the poor and the robbed. Maybe your reverence has deemed it your duty to tell the authorities that which you say they have learned?"

A knife through his breast-bone would have given a kindlier wound to his hearer. Amazement under such an outrage was stronger in Don Silverio than any other feeling for the first moment. Adone—Adone!—his scholar, his beloved,

his disciple!—spoke to him thus! Then an overwhelming disgust and scorn swept over him, and was stronger than his pain. He could have stricken the ungrateful youth to the earth. The muscles of his right arm swelled and throbbed; then, with an intense effort, he controlled the impulse to avenge. Without a word, and with one glance of reproach and of disdain, he turned away and went through the morning shadows under the drooping and laden apple boughs.

Adone, with his teeth set hard and his eyes filled with savage fire, sprang down into the trench and resumed his work.

He was impenitent.

"He is mad! He knows not what he says!" thought the man whom he had insulted. But though he strove to excuse the outrage it was like a poisoned blade in his flesh.

Adone could suspect him! Adone could believe him to be an informer!

Was this all the recompense for eighteen years of unwearying affection, patience, and tuition? Though the whole world had witnessed against him, he would have sworn that Adone Alba would have been faithful to him.

"He is mad," he thought. "His first great wrong turns his blood to poison. He will come to me weeping to-morrow."

But he knew that what Adone had said to him,

however repented of, however washed away with tears, was one of those injuries which may be forgiven, but can never be forgotten, by any living man. It would yawn like a pit between them for ever.

XVII

To this apple-tree field there was a high hedge of luxuriant elder and ash, myrtle and field-roses. Behind this hedge old Gianna was waiting for him; the tears were running down her face. She took the skirt of his coat between her hands. "Wait, your reverence, wait! The child is in the cattle stable."

Don Silverio looked down on her a few moments without comprehension. Then he remembered.

"Is she there indeed? Poor little soul! She must not go to the house."

"She does not dream of it, Sir. Only she cannot understand why Madonna Clelia's anger is so terrible. What can I do——oh, Lord!"

"Keep her where she is for the present. I am going home. I will speak with some of the women in Ruscino, and find her some temporary shelter."

"She will go to none, sir. She says she must be where she can serve Adone. If she be shut up, she will escape and run into the woods. Three years ago she was a wild thing; she will turn wild again."

"Like enough! But we must do what we can. I am going home. I will come or send to you in a few hours."

Gianna reluctantly let him go. As he crossed the river he looked down on the bright water, here green as emeralds, there brown as peat, eddying round the old stone piers of the bridge, and an infinite sorrow was on him.

As a forest fire sweeps away under its rolling smoke and waves of flame millions of obscure and harmless creatures, so the baneful fires of men's greed and speculations came from afar and laid low these harmless lives with neither thought of them or pity.

Later in the day he sent word to Gianna to bring Nerina to the presbytery. They both came, obedient. The child looked tired and had lost her bright colour; but she had a resolute look on her face.

"My poor little girl," he said gently to her, "Madonna Clelia is angered against you. We will hope her anger will pass ere long. Meanwhile you must not go to the house. You would not make ill-blood between a mother and her son?"

"No," said Nerina.

"I have found a home for awhile for you, with old Alaida Manzi; you know her; she is a good

creature. I am very sorry for you, my child; but you did wrong to be absent at night; above all not to go back to your chamber when Clelia Alba bade you do so."

Nerina's face darkened. "I did no harm."

"I am sure you did not mean to do any; but you disobeyed Madonna Clelia."

Nerina was silent.

"You are a young girl; you must not roam the country at night. It is most perilous. Decent maidens and women are never abroad after moonrise."

Nerina said nothing.

"You will promise me never to go out at night again?"

"I cannot promise that, sir."

"Why?"

"If I be wanted, I shall go."

"If Adone Alba bid you—is that your meaning?"

Nerina was silent.

"Do you think that it is fitting for you to have secrets from me, your confessor?"

Nerina was silent: her rosy mouth was closed firmly. It was very terrible to have to displease and disobey Don Silverio; but she would not speak, not if she should burn in everlasting flames for ever.

"Take her away. Take her to Alaida," he said wearily to Gianna.

"She only obeys Adone, sir," said the old woman. "All I can say counts as naught."

"Adone will send her on no more midnight errands, unless he be brute and fool both. Take her away. Look to her, you and Alaida."

"I will do what I can, sir," said Gianna humbly, and pushed the girl out into the village street before her.

Don Silverio sat down at his deal writing-table and wrote in his fine, clear caligraphy a few lines: *"In the name of my holy office I forbid you to risk the life and good name of the maiden Nerina on your unlawful errands."*

Then he signed and sealed the sheet, and sent it by his sacristan to Adone.

He received no answer.

The night which followed was one of the most bitter in its meditations that he had ever spent; and he had spent many cruel and sleepless nights ere then.

That Adone could for one fleeting moment have harboured so vile a thought filled him with nausea and amaze. Betray them! He!—who would willingly have given up such years of life as might remain to him could he by such a sacrifice have saved their river and their valley from

destruction. There was nothing short of vice or crime which he would not have done to save the Edera water from its fate. But it was utterly impossible to do anything. Even men of eminence had often brought all their forces of wealth and of argument against similar enterprises, and had failed in their opposition. What could a few score of peasants, and one poor ecclesiastic, do against all the omnipotence of Parliament, of millionaires, of secretaries of State, of speculators, of promoters, tenacious and forcible and ravenous as the octopus?

In those lonely night hours when the moonbeams shone on his bed and the little white dog nestled itself close to his shoulder, he was tortured also by the sense that it was his duty to arrest Adone and the men of the Vald'edera in their mad course, even at the price of such treachery to them as Adone had dared to attribute to him. But if that were his duty it must be his first duty which consciously he had left undone!

If he could only stop them on their headlong folly by betraying them they must rush on to their doom!

He saw no light, no hope, no assistance anywhere. These lads would not be able to save a single branch of the river water, nor a sword-rush on its banks, nor a moorhen in its shallows,

nor a cluster of myosotis upon its banks, and they would ruin themselves.

The round golden moon shone between the budding vine-leaves at his casement.

"Are you not tired?" he said to the shining orb. "Are you not tired of watching the endless cruelties and insanities on earth?"

XVIII

THE people of Ruscino went early to their beds; the light of the oil-wicks of the Presbytery was always the only light in the village half an hour after dark. Nerina went uncomplainingly to hers in the dark stone house within the walls where she had been told that it was her lot to dwell. She did not break her fast; she drank great draughts of water; then, with no word except a brief good-night, she went to the sacking filled with leaves which the old woman Alaida pointed out for her occupancy.

"She is soon reconciled," thought the old crone. "They have trained her well."

Relieved of all anxiety, she herself lay down in the dark and slept. The girl seemed a good, quiet, tame little thing, and said her paternosters as she should do. But Nerina did not sleep. She was stifled in this little close room with its one shuttered window. She who was used to sleep with the fresh fragrant air of the dark fields blowing over her in her loft, felt the sour, stagnant atmosphere take her like a hand by the throat.

As soon as she heard by the heavy breathing of the aged woman that she was sunk in the congested slumber of old age the child got up noislessly—she had not undressed—and stole out of the chamber, taking the door key from the nail on which Alaida had hung it. A short stone stair led down to the entrance. No one else was sleeping in the house; all was dark, and she had not even a match or a tinder-box; but she felt her way to the outer door, unlocked it, as she had been used to unlock the door at the Terra Vergine, and in another moment ran down the steep and stony street. She laughed as the wind from the river blew against her lips, and brought her the fragrance of Adone's autumn fields.

"I shall be in time!" she thought, as she ran down a short cut which led, in a breakneck descent, over the slope of what had once been the glacis of the fortress, beneath the Rocca to the bridge.

The usual spot for the assembly of the malcontents was a grassy hollow surrounded on all sides with woods, and called the tomb of Asdrubal, from a mound of masonry which bore that name; although it was utterly improbable that Asdrubal who had been slain a hundred miles to the northeast on the Marecchia water, should have been buried in the Vald'edera at all; but the place and the name were well known in the district to hun-

dreds of peasants, who knew no more who or what Asdrubal had been than they knew the names of the stars which form the constellation of Perseus.

Adone had summoned them to be there by midnight, and he was passing from the confines of his own lands on to those of the open moors when the child saw him. He was dressed in his working clothes, but he was fully armed: his gun on his shoulder, his great pistols in his sash, his dagger in his stocking. They were ancient arms; but they had served in matters of life and death, and would so serve again. On the three-edged blade of the sixteenth-century poignard was a blood-stain more than a century old which nothing would efface.

"Nerina!" he cried, and was more distressed than pleased to see her there; he had not thought of her.

In the moonlight and the silvery olive foliage her little sunburnt face and figure took a softer and more feminine grace. But Adone had no sight for it. For him she was but a sturdy little pony, who would trot till she dropped.

He was cruel as those who are possessed by one intense and absorbing purpose always are: he was cruel to Nerina as Garibaldi, in the days of Ravenna, was cruel to Anita.

But through that intense egotism which sees

in all the world only its own cause, its own end, its own misery, there touched him for one instant an unselfish pity for the child of whom he had made so mercilessly his servant and his slave.

"Poor little girl! I have been hard to you, I have been cruel and unfair," he said, as a vague sense of her infinite devotion to him moved him as a man may be moved by a dog's fidelity.

"You have been good to me," said Nerina; and from the bottom of her heart she thought so. "I came to see if you wanted me," she added humbly.

"No, no. They think ill of you for going my errands. Poor child, I have done you harm enough. I will not do you more."

"You have done me only good."

"What! When my mother has turned you out of the house!"

"It is her right."

"Let it be so for a moment. You shall come back. You are with old Alaida?"

"Yes."

"How can you be out to-night?"

"She sleeps heavily, and the lock is not hard."

"You are a brave child."

"Is there nothing to do to-night?"

"No, dear."

"Where do you go?"

"To meet the men at the tomb of Asdrubal."

"Who summoned them?"

"I myself. You must be sad and sorry, child, and it is my fault."

She checked a sob in her throat. "I am not far away, and old Alaida is kind. Let me go on some errand to-night?"

"No, my dear, I cannot."

He recalled the words of the message which he had received from Don Silverio that day. He knew the justice of this message, he knew that it only forbade him what all humanity, hospitality, manhood, and compassion forbade to him. One terrible passion had warped his nature, closed his heart, and invaded his reason to the exclusion of all other thoughts or instincts; but he was not yet so lost to shame as, now that he knew what he had done, to send out a female creature into peril to do his bidding.

"Tell me, then, tell me, when will anything be done?"

"Whenever the labourers come to work on the water we shall drive them away."

"But if they will not go?"

"Child, the river is deep; we know its ways and its soundings; they do not."

Her great bright eyes flashed fire: an unholy joy laughed in them.

"We will baptize them over again!" she said; and all her face laughed and sparkled in the moonlight. There was fierce mountain blood in her

veins; it grew hot at the thought of slaughter like the juice of grapes warmed in an August noon.

He laughed also, savagely. "Their blood will be on their own heads!"

He meant to drive them out, swamp them in the stream, choke them in the sand, hunt them in the heather; make every man of them rue the day that ever they came thither to meddle with the Edera water.

"Curse them! Their blood will be on their own heads!" he said between his teeth. He was thinking of the strange men who it was said would be at work on the land and the water before the moon, young now, should be in her last quarter; men hired by the hundreds, day labourers of the Romagna and the Puglia, leased by contract, marshalled under overseers, different in nothing from slaves who groan under the white man's lash in Africa.

As he went on along the path which led through his own fields to the moors, his soul was dark as night; it enraged him to have been forced by his conscience and his honour to obey the command of Don Silverio.

"No, no," he said sternly. "Get you back to your rest at Ruscino. I did wrong, I did basely to use your ignorance and abuse your obedience. Get you gone, and listen to your priest, not to me."

The child, ever obedient, vanished through the olive boughs. Adone went onward northward to his tryst.

But she did not go over the bridge. She waited a little while then followed on his track. Gianna was right. She was a wild bird. She had been caught and tamed for a time, but she was always wild. The life which they had given her had been precious and sweet to her, and she had learned willingly all its ways; but at the bottom of her heart the love of liberty, the love of movement, the love of air and sky and freedom were stronger than all. She was of an adventurous temper also, and brave like all Abruzzese, and she longed to see one of those moonlit midnight meetings of armed men to which she had so often borne the summons. Now that she had escaped from Alaida's she could not have forced herself to go back out of this clear, cool, radiant, night into the little, close, dark, sleeping-chamber. No, not if Don Silverio himself had stood in her path with the cross raised.

She doubled like a hare, and came out on to the path which Adone had taken, and within a few yards of him, ready to hide herself in the furze and broom if he turned his head. But he did not do so; he went straight onward.

She knew the way to the tomb of Asdrubal, even in the darkness, as well as he did. It was a

grassy hollow surrounded by dense trees, some five miles or more from the Terra Vergine, on the north bank of the river. The flat, grassy solitude was clear enough and large enough to permit the assemblage of several scores of men; it was the spot generally chosen for these armed meetings.

Adone went on, unconscious that he was followed; he went at a swing trot, easy, and swift; the sinews of his lithe limbs were strong as steel, and his rage, all aflame, lent lightning to his feet.

She allowed Adone to precede her by half a mile or more, for if he had seen her his anger would have been great, and she feared it. She went skipping and bounding along where the path was clear in all the joy of liberty and rapture of the fresh night air. The hours spent in Alaida's close house in the village had been as terrible to her as his hours in a birdcatcher's hamper are to a wild bird. Up at Ansalda she had always been out of doors, and here at the Terra Vergine she had gone under a roof only to eat and sleep.

The moon which was in the beginning of its first quarter had passed behind the hills; there was little light, for there were as yet few stars visible, but that was no matter to her. She knew her way as well as any mountain hare.

The pungent odour of the heaths through which she went seemed to her like a draught of wine, the strong sea breeze which was blowing bore her up

like wings. She forgot that she was once more a homeless waif, as she had been that day when she had sat under the dock leaves by the Edera water. He had told her she should go back; she believed him: that was enough. Madonna Clelia would forgive, for what harm had she done? All would be well; she would feed the oxen again, and go again to the spring for water, and all would be as it had been before—her thoughts, her desires, went no farther than that. And she went on gaily, running where there was open ground, pushing hard where the heather grew, going always in the same path as Adone had done. All of a sudden she stopped short, in alarm. The night was still; the rushing of the river was loud upon it, the owls hooted and chuckled, now and then a fox in the thickets barked. There are many sounds in the open country at night; sounds of whirring pinions, of stealthy feet, of shrill, lone cries, of breaking twigs, of breaking ferns, of little rivulets unheard by day, of timid creatures taking courage in the dark. But to these sounds she was used; she could give a name to every one of them. She heard now what was unfamiliar to her in these solitudes; she heard the footsteps of men; and it seemed to her, all around her, as though in a moment of time, the heath and bracken and furze grew alive with them. Were they men of Ruscino going to their tryst with Adone? She did not

think so, for she had never known the few men in the village summon courage to join the armed meetings of the men of the valley. She stopped and listened, as a pole-cat which was near her did; the sounds were those of human beings, breathing, creeping, moving under the heather.

Suddenly she felt some presence close to her in the dark; she held her breath; she shrank noiselessly between the plumes of heath. If they were men of the country they would not hurt her, but if not—she was not sure.

Near her was an open space where the heather had been recently cut. The men debouched on to it from the undergrowth; there was a faint light from the stars on that strip of rough grass; she saw that they were soldiers, five in number.

A great terror cowed her like a hand of ice at her heart, a terror not for herself, but for those away there, in the hollow bed by the three stone-pines.

They were soldiers; yes, they were soldiers; the sounds she had heard had been the crushing of the plants under their feet, the click of their muskets as they moved; they were soldiers! Where had they come from? There were no soldiers at Ruscino.

The only time when she had ever seen soldiers had been when the troopers had captured Baruffo. These were not troopers; they were small men, on foot, linen-clad, moving stealthily, and as if in

fear; only the tubes of their muskets glistened in the light of the great planets.

She crouched down lower and lower, trying to enter the ground and hide; she hoped they would go onward, and then she could run—faster than they—and reach the hollow, and warn Adone and his fellows. She had no doubt that they came to surprise the meeting; but she hoped from their pauses and hesitating steps that they were uncertain what way to take.

"If you come to me to lead you—aye! I will lead you!—you will not forget where I lead!" she said to herself, as she hid under the heather; and her courage rose, for she saw a deed to be done. For they were now very near to the place of meeting, and could have taken the rebels in a trap, if they had only known where they were; but she, watching them stand still, and stare, and look up to the stars, and then north, south, east, and west, saw that they did not know, and that it might be possible to lead them away from the spot by artifice, as the quail leads the sportsman away from the place where her nest is hidden.

As the thought took shape in her brain a sixth man, a sergeant who commanded them, touched her with his foot, stooped, clutched her, and pulled her upward. She did not try to escape.

"What beast of night have we here?" he cried. "Spawn of devils, who are you?"

Nerina writhed under the grip of his iron fin-

gers, but she still did not try to escape. He cursed her, swore at her, shook her, crushed her arm black and blue. She was sick with pain, but she was mute.

"Who are you?" he shouted.

"I come down from the mountains to work here in summer."

"Can any of you speak the dialect?" cried the sergeant to his privates.

One man answered, "I come from Monte Corno; it is much the same tongue there as in these parts."

"Ask her the way, then."

The soldier obeyed.

"What is the way to the Three Pines?—to the tomb of Asdrubal?"

"The way is long," said Nerina.

"Do you know it?"

"I know it."

"Have you heard tell of it?"

"Yes."

"That men meet at night there?"

"Yes."

"Meet this night there?"

"Yes."

"You know where the tomb of Asdrubal is?"

"Have I not told you?"

The soldier repeated her answer translated to his sergeant; the latter kept his grasp on her.

"Ask her if she will take us there."

The soldier asked her and translated her answer.

"If we give her two gold pieces she will take us there."

"Spawn of hell! I will give her nothing. But if she do not lead us aright I will give her a bullet for her breakfast."

The soldier translated to Nerina: "He will give you two gold pieces if you guide us aright; and you need have no fear; we are honest men and the king's servants."

"I will guide the king's servants," said Nerina.

"You are sure of the way?"

"Is the homing pigeon sure of his?"

"Let us be off," said the sergeant. "A bullet for her if she fail."

He had little pleasure in trusting to this girl of the Abruzzi hills, but he and his men were lost upon these moors, and might grope all night, and miss the meeting, and fail to surprise those who gathered at it. He reckoned upon fear as a sure agent to keep her true, as it kept his conscripts under arms.

"Bid him take his hand off me," said Nerina, "or I do not move."

The private translated to his superior. "She prays of your mercy to leave her free, as she cannot pass through the heather."

The sergeant let her go unwillingly, but pushed her in front of him, and levelled his revolver at her.

"Tell her if she try to get away I fire."

"Tell him I know that," said Nerina.

She was not afraid, for a fierce, unholy joy was in her veins; she could have sung, she could have laughed, she could have danced; she held them in her power; they had come to ensnare Adone, and she had got them in her power as if they were so many moles!

They tied her hands behind her; she let them do it; she did not want her hands. Then she began to push her way doggedly with her head down to the south. The tomb of Asdrubal was due north; she could see the pole star, and turned her back to it and went due south.

Three miles or more southward there was a large *pollino,* or swamp known as L'Erba Molle, the wet grass; the grass was luxuriant, the flora was varied and beautiful; in appearance it was a field, in reality it was a morass; to all people of the Vald'edera it was dreaded and avoided, as quicksands are by the seashore.

She went on as fast as the narrow path, winding in and out between the undergrowth, permitted her to go; with the armed soldiers, heavy laden with their knapsacks and their boots, following

her clumsily, and with effort, muttering curses on their ill-luck and their sleepless night.

The stars were now larger and brighter; the darkness was lightened, the river was running away from its southern birthplace in the hills which lie like crouched lions about the feet of the Leonessa. She could hear its distant murmur. "They come to capture you," she said to it, "and I will kill them. They shall choke and go down, down, down——"

And her heart leapt within her; and she went with the loaded revolver pointed at her from behind as though she went to her bridal-bed.

"Where are you taking us, vile little bitch?" the sergeant cried, and the soldier from the Abruzzi translated: "Pretty little brown one, whither do you go?"

"I take you straight," said Nerina, "only you go too clumsily, for men in these parts should not wear leather upon their feet."

And the soldiers sighed assent, and would willingly have gone barefoot, and the sergeant swore in tones of thunder because he could not understand what she said.

Before long they came in sight of the Erba Molle; the wet grass, which looked like a fair, peaceful pasture, with thousands of sword rushes golden upon its surface. The dawn was faint, and

shone upon its verdure; there were great flocks of water-birds at roost around it, and they rose with shrill cries and great noise of wings, with a roar as though a tide were rising.

"Pass you after me, and set your feet where I set mine," said Nerina to the little soldier of the Abruzzi, and she put down her foot on the first pile, sunk almost invisible under the bright green slime.

Across it stretched a line of wooden piles which served as stepping-stones to those who had the courage and the steadiness to leap from one to another of them. It was not three times in a season that any one dared to do so. Adone did so sometimes; and he had taught Nerina how to make the passage.

The swamp was of a brilliant emerald hue from the ooze and stagnant waters under the grass, but in aspect it seemed a smooth meadow, with only the ripple of the grasses like that of a green lake to disturb its surface; it had killed many who had trusted to it.

The soldier of the Abruzzi said to his superior, "She says we must set our feet where she sets hers. We are quite near now to the tomb of the barbarian."

Nerina, with the light leap of a kid, bounded from pile to pile. They thought she went on solid ground; on meadow grass. The sergeant and his

men crowded on to what they thought was pasture. In the uncertain shadows and scarce dawning light, they did not see the row of submerged piles. They sank like stones in the thick ooze; they were sucked under to their knees, to their waists, to their shoulders, to their mouths; the yielding grasses, the clutching slime, the tangled weed, the bottomless mud, took hold of them; the water-birds shrieked and beat their wings; the hideous clamor of dying men answered them.

Nerina had reached the other side of the morass in safety, and her mocking laughter rang upon their ears.

"I have led you well!" she cried to them. "I have led you well, oh servants of the king!—oh swine!—oh slaves!—oh spies!—oh hunters and butchers of men!"

And she danced on the edge of the field of death, and the rosy light of the sunrise shone on her face.

Had she run onward into the wood beyond she would have been saved. That instant of triumph and mockery lost her.

The sergeant had put his revolver in his teeth; he knew now that he was a dead man; the slime was up to his chin, under his feet the grass and the mud quaked, yielded, yawned like a grave.

He drew his right arm out of the ooze, seized his revolver, and aimed at the dancing, mocking,

triumphant figure, beyond the border of golden sword rushes. With a supreme effort he fired; then he sank under the mud and weed.

The child dropped dead on the edge of the morass.

One by one each soldier sank. Not one escaped.

The water-birds came back from their upward flight and settled again on the swamp.

Underneath it all was still.

XIX

DON SILVERIO rose with the dawn of day, and entered his church at five of the clock. There were but a few women in the gaunt, dark vastness of the nave. The morning was hot, and the scent of ripe fruit and fresh-cut grass came in from the fields over the broken walls and into the ancient houses.

When mass was over, old Alaida crept over the mouldy mosaics timidly to his side, and kneeled down on the stones.

"Most reverend," she whispered. "'Twas not my fault. I slept heavily; she must have unlocked the door, for it was undone at dawn; her bed is empty, she has not returned."

"You speak of Nerina?"

"Of Nerina, reverence. I did all I could. It was not my fault. She was like a hawk in a cage."

"I am grieved," he said; and he thought: "Is it Adone?"

He feared so.

"Is she not at the Terra Vergine?" he asked.

Alaida shook her head.

"No, reverend sir. I sent my grandchild to

ask there. Gianna has not seen her, and says the girl would never dare to go near Clelia Alba."

"I am grieved," said Don Silverio again.

He did not blame the old woman, as who, he thought, blames one who could not tame an eaglet?

He went back to the presbytery and broke his fast on a glass of water, some bread, and some cresses from the river.

He had sent for Gianna. In half an hour she came, distressed and frightened.

"Sir, I know not of her; I should not dare to harbour her, even in the cattle-stall. Madonna Clelia would turn me adrift. When Madonna Clelia has once spoken——"

"Adone is at home?"

"Alas! no, sir. He went out at midnight; we have not seen him since. He told me he went to a meeting of men at the Three Pines, at what they call the Tomb of the Barbarian."

Don Silverio was silent.

"It is very grave," he said at last.

"Aye, sir, grave indeed," said Gianna. "Would that it were love between them, sir. Love is sweet and wholesome and kind, but there is no such thing in Adone's heart. There it is only, alas! blackness and fire and hatred, sir; blood-lust against those who mean ill to the river."

"And his mother has lost all influence over him?"

"All, sir. She is no more to him now than a bent stick. Yet, months ago, she gave him her pearls and her bracelets, and he sold them in a distant town to buy weapons."

"Indeed? What madness!"

"How else could the men have been armed, sir?"

"Armed!" he repeated. "And of what use is it to arm? What use is it for two hundred peasants to struggle against the whole forces of the State? They will rot in prison; that is all that they will do."

"Maybe yes, sir. Maybe no," said the old woman with the obstinacy of ignorance. "Some one must begin. They have no right to take the water away, sir; no more right than to take the breast from the babe."

Then, afraid of having said so much, she dropped her courtesy and went out into the street. But in another moment she came back into the study with a scared, blanched face, in which the wrinkles were scarred deep like furrows in a field.

"Sir—sir!" she gasped, "there are the soldiery amongst us."

Don Silverio rose in haste, put the little dog on his armchair, closed the door of his study, and went down the narrow stone passage which parted his bookroom from the entrance. The lofty doorway showed him the stones of the familiar street, a buttress of his church, a great branch of one of

the self-sown ilex-trees, the glitter of the arms and the white leather of the cross belts of a sentinel. The shrill lamentations of the women seemed to rend the sunny air. He shuddered as he heard. Coming up the street farther off were half a troop of carabineers and a score of dragoons; the swords of the latter were drawn, the former had their carbines levelled. The villagers, screaming with terror, were closing their doors and shutters in frantic haste; the door of the presbytery alone remained open. Don Silverio went into the middle of the road, and addressed the officer who headed the carabineers.

"May I ask to what my parish owes this visit?"

"We owe no answer to you, reverend sir," said the lieutenant.

The people were sobbing hysterically, catching their children in their arms, calling to the Holy Mother to save them, kneeling down on the sharp stones in the dust. Their priest felt ashamed of them.

"My people," he called to them, "do not be afraid. Do not hide yourselves. Do not kneel to these troopers. We have done no wrong."

"I forbid you to address the crowd," said the officer. "Get you back into your house."

"What is my offence?"

"You will learn in good time," said the commandant. "Get you into your presbytery."

"My place is with my people."

The officer, impatient, struck him on the chest with the pommel of his sword.

Two carabineers thrust him back into the passage.

"No law justifies your conduct," he said coldly, "or authorises you to sever me from my flock."

"The sabre is law here," said the lieutenant in command.

"It is the only law known anywhere in this kingdom," said Don Silverio.

"Arrest him," said the officer. "He is creating disorder."

The carabineers drove him into his study, and a brigadier began to ransack his papers and drawers.

He said nothing; the seizure of his manuscripts and documents were indifferent to him, for there was nothing he had ever written which would not bear the fullest light. But the insolent and arbitrary act moved him to keen anxiety because it showed that the military men had licence to do their worst, at their will, and his anguish of apprehension was for Adone. He could only hope and pray that Adone had returned, and might be found tranquilly at work in the fields of the Terra Vergine. But his fears were great. Unless more soldiery were patrolling the district in all directions it was little likely, he thought, that these men would conduct themselves thus in Ruscino;

he had no doubt that it was a concerted movement, directed by the Prefect and the general commanding the garrisons of the province, and intended to net in one haul the malcontents of the Vald'edera.

From his study there was no view upon the street; he could hear the wailing of women and screaming of children from the now closed houses: that was all.

"What is it your men do to my people?" he said sternly to the lieutenant.

The young man did not reply; he went on throwing papers into a trunk.

"Where is your warrant for this search? We are not in a state of siege?" asked Don Silverio.

The officer, with a significant gesture, drew his sabre up half way out of its sheath; then let it fall again with a clash. He vouchsafed no other answer.

Some women's faces pressed in at the grating of the window which looked on the little garden, scared, blanched, horrified, the white head, and sunburnt features of Gianna foremost.

"Reverendissimo!" they screamed as with one voice. "They are bringing the lads in from the moors."

And Gianna shrieked, "Adone! They have got Adone!"

Don Silverio sprang to his feet.

"Adone! Have you taken Adone Alba?"

"The ringleader! By Bacchus! yes," cried the brigadier, with a laugh. "He will get thirty years at the galleys. Your flock does you honour, Reverendissimo!"

"Let me go to my flock," said Don Silverio; and some tone in his voice, some gesture of his hand, had an authority in them which compelled the young man to let him pass unopposed.

He went down the stone passage to the archway of the open door. A soldier stood sentinel there. The street was crowded with armed men. The air was full of a hideous clangour and clamour; above all rose the shrill screams of the women.

"No one passes," said the sentinel, and he levelled the mouth of his musket at Don Silverio's breast.

"I pass," said the priest, and with his bare hand he grasped the barrel of the musket and forced it upward.

"I rule here, in the name of God," he said in a voice which rolled down the street with majestic melody, dominating the screams, the oaths, the hell of evil sound; and he went down the steps of his house, and no man dared lay a hand on him.

Where was Adone?

He could hear the trampling of horses and the jingling of spears and scabbards; the half squadron who had beaten the moors that night were

coming up the street. Half a battalion of soldiers of the line, escorted by carabineers, came in from the country, climbing the steep street, driving before them a rabble of young men, disarmed, wounded, lame, with their hands tied behind them, the remnant of those who had met at the tomb of Asdrubal in the night just passed. They had been surprised, seized, surrounded by a wall of steel; some had answered to their leader's call and had defended themselves, but these had been few; most of them had thrown down their weapons and begged for mercy when the cold steel of the soldiers was at their throats. Adone had fought as though the shade of Asdrubal had passed into him; but his friends had failed him; his enemies had outnumbered him a score to one; he had been overpowered, disarmed, bound, dragged through his native heather backward and upward to Ruscino, reaching the shadow of the walls as the sun rose.

The child lay dead by the stagnant pond, and the men she had led to their death lay choked with the weeds and the slime; but of that he knew naught.

All he knew was that his cause was lost, his life forfeit, his last hope dead.

Only by his stature and his bearing could he be recognised. His features were black from powder and gore; his right arm hung broken by a shot;

his clothing had been torn off him to his waist; he was lame; but he alone still bore himself erect as he came on up the village street. The others were huddled together in a fainting, tottering, crazed mob; all were sick and swooning from the long march, beaten when they paused by belts and the flat of sabres.

Don Silverio saw that sight in front of his church, in the white, clear light of early morning, and on the air there was a sickly stench of sweat, of powder, of wounds, of dust.

He went straight to the side of Adone.

"My son, my son! I will come with you. They cannot refuse me that."

But the soul of Adone was as a pit in which a thousand devils strove for mastery. There was no light in it, no conscience, no gratitude, no remorse.

"Judas!" he cried aloud; and there was foam on his lips and there was red blood in his eyes. "Judas! you betrayed us!"

Then as a young bull lowers his horns he bent his head and bit through and through to the bone the wrist of the soldier who held him; in terror and pain the man shrieked and let go his hold; Adone's arms were bound behind him, but his limbs, though they dripped blood, were free.

He fronted the church, and that breach in the

blocks of the Etruscan wall through which Nerina had taken her path to the river a few hours before. He knew every inch of the descent. Hundreds of times in his boyhood had he run along the ruined wall and leaped from block to block of the Cyclopean huge stones, to spring with joyous shouts into the river below.

As the soldier with a scream of agony let go his hold, he broke away like a young lion released from the den. Before they could seize him he had sprung over the wall and was tearing down the slope; the soldiers in swift pursuit behind him stumbled, rolled down the slippery grass, fell over the blocks of granite. He, sure of foot, knowing the way from childhood, ran down it safely, though blood poured from his wounds and blinded his sight, and a sickness like the swooning of death dulled his brain. Beyond him and behind him was the river. He dashed into it like a hunted beast swimming to sanctuary; he ran along in it with its brightness and coolness rippling against his parched throat. He stooped and kissed it for the last time.

"Take me—save me—comrade—brother—friend!" he cried aloud to it with his last breath of life.

Then the sky grew dark, and only the sound of the water was heard in his ears. By the bridge

its depth was great, and the current was strong under the shade of the ruined keep. It swept his body onward to the sea.

From the cornfields under the olive-trees his mother saw him spring to that last embrace.

XX

IT WAS the beginning of winter when Don Silverio Frascara, having been put upon his trial and no evidence of any sort having been adduced against him, was declared innocent and set free, no compensation or apology being offered to him.

"Were it only military law it had been easy enough to find him guilty," said Senator Giovacchino Gallo to the Syndic of San Beda, and the Count Corradini warmly agreed with his Excellency that for the sake of law, order, and public peace it would be well could the military tribunals be always substituted for the civil; but alas! the monarchy was not yet absolute!

He had been detained many weeks and months at the city by the sea, where the trial of the young men of the Vald'edera had been held with all the prolonged, tedious, and cruel delays common to the national laws. Great efforts had been made to implicate him in the criminal charges; but it had been found impossible to verify such suspicions; every witness by others, and every action of his own, proved the wisdom, the purity, and the excellence in counsel and example of his whole

life at Ruscino. The unhappy youths who had been taken with arms in their hands were condemned for overt rebellion and conspiracy against authority, and were sentenced, some to four, some to seven, some to ten, and, a few who were considered the ringleaders, to twenty-five years of cellular confinement. But against Don Silverio it was found impossible even to make out the semblance of an accusation, the testimony even of those hostile to him being irresistibly in his favour in all ways. He had done his utmost to defend the poor boys and men who had been misled by Adone to their own undoing, and he had defended also the natives and the character of the dead with an eloquence which moved to tears the public who heard him, and touched even the hearts of stone of president and advocates; and he had done this at his own imminent risk; for men of law can never be brought to understand that comprehension is not collusion, as that pity is not fellowship. But all his efforts failed to save the young men from the utmost rigour of the law. It even declared that the most severe example was necessary to check once for all by its terrors the tendency of the common people to resist the State and its public works and decrees. Useful and patriotic enterprises must not be impeded or wrecked because ignorance was opposed to progress: thus said the Public Prosecutor in an impassioned ora-

tion which gained for him eventually emolument and preferment. The rustics were sent in a body to the penitentiaries; and Don Silverio was permitted to go home.

Cold northern winds blew from the upper Apennines and piled the snows upon the marble and granite of the Abruzzi as he descended from the hills and crossed the valley of the Edera towards Ruscino. It seemed to him as though a century had passed since he had left it. In the icy wind which blew from the snows of the hills below the Leonessa he shivered, for he had only one poor, thin coat to cover him. His strength, naturally great, had given way under the mental and physical sufferings of the last six months, although no word of lament had ever escaped him. Like all generous natures he rebuked himself for the sins of others. Incessantly he asked himself—might he not have saved Adone?

As he came to the turn in the road which brought him within sight of the river, he sat down on a stone and covered his eyes with his hand. He dreaded what his eyes should see. The sacristan had come to meet him bringing the little dog, grown thin, and sad, and old with sorrow.

"I did all I could for him, but he would not be consoled," murmured the old man.

From this point he had reached the course of the Edera and the lands of the Terra Vergine

were visible, he knew. With an effort, like one who forces his will to look on a dead face, he uncovered his eyes and looked downward. The olive-trees were still standing; where the house had stood was a black, charred, roofless shell.

"Reverend," said the old man below his breath, "when she knew Adone was drowned she set fire to the house, and so perished. They say she had promised her son."

"I know!" said Don Silverio.

The wind from the north swept across the valley and drove the water of the Edera in yellow foam and black eddies through the dead sedges. Above Ruscino the acacia thickets were down, the water was choked with timber and iron and stone, the heather was trampled and hacked, the sand and gravel were piled in heaps, the naked soil yawned in places like fresh-dug graves; along the southern bank were laid the metals of a light railway; on the lines of it were some empty trucks filled with bricks; the wooden huts of the workmen covered a dreary, dusty space; the water was still flowing, but on all the scene were the soil, the disorder, the destruction, the vulgar meanness and disfigurement which accompany modern labour and affront like a coarse bruise on the gracious face of Nature.

"There have been three hundred men from the Puglia at work," said the sacristan. "They have

stopped awhile now on account of the frost, but as soon as the weather opens——"

"Enough, enough!" murmured Don Silverio; and he rose, and holding the little dog in his arms, went on down the uncouth familiar road.

"His body has never been found?" he asked under his breath.

The old man shook his head.

"Nay, sir; what Edera loves it keeps. He dropped where he knew it was deepest."

As he returned up the village street there was not a soul to give him greeting except old Gianna, who kneeled weeping at his feet. The people peered out of their doorways and casements, but they said not a word of welcome. The memory of Adone was an idolatry with them, and Adone had said that he had betrayed them. One woman threw a stone at Signorino. Don Silverio covered the little dog, and received the blow on his own arm.

"For twenty years I have had no thought but to serve these, my people!" he thought; but he neither rebuked nor reproached them.

The women as he passed them hissed at him: "Judas! Judas!"

One man alone said: "Nay, 'tis a shame. Have you forgot what he did in the cholera? 'Tis long ago, but still——"

But the women said, "He betrayed the poor lads. He brought the soldiers. He sold the water."

Then, under that outrage, his manhood and his dignity revived.

He drew his tall form erect, and passed through them, and gave them his blessing as he passed.

Then he went within his church and remained there alone.

"He is gone to pray for the soul of Adone," said the sacristan.

When he came out of the church and entered his house, the street was empty; the people were afraid of what they had done and of their own ingratitude. He crossed the threshold of the presbytery. The sere vine veiled his study casement; in the silence he could hear the sound of the Edera water; he sat down at his familiar table, and leaned his arms on it, his head on his arms. His eyes were wet, and his heart was sick; his courage was broken.

"How shall I bear my life here?" he thought. All which had made it of value and lightened its solitude was gone. Even his people had turned against him; suspicious, thankless, hostile.

The old sacristan, standing doubtful and timid at the entrance of the chamber, drew near and reverently touched his arm.

"Sir—here is a letter—it came three days ago."

Don Silverio stretched out his hand over the little dog's head and took it.

He changed colour as he saw its seal and superscription.

Rome had at last remembered him and awakened to his value.

At the last Consistory he had been nominated to the Cardinalate.

THE END.

JAN 13 1954